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Can the Subaltern Body Perform? Moroccan Shikhat as Living Heritage in the Virtual Era

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Abstract

This paper is premised upon the Moroccan shikhat dancers' performance. Shikhat dancers perform a well-known Moroccan traditional dance during various sorts of both public and private ceremonies (although their eloquent performances are often attacked on the grounds of indecency and of being a real menace to the Moroccan norms). Moving virtually, Moroccan shikhat have gained publicity by using technological devices to record and disseminate their performance. Technology, as this paper argues, has played a vital role in challenging the patriarchal and social stigma modes of thoughts surrounding their bodies. The paper attempts to demonstrate that, through using technology to transmit their dance performance, shikhat succeeded in creating their own virtual platforms for emancipation. Besides, through their performed bodies and virtual spaces, we can say, that shikhat seek to develop a feminist mediated praxis to deconstruct existing discriminatory discourses. The paper further argues that the contemporary moment is characterized by a systematic invisibility and objectification of these dancing women.

Key words: Female performers, body, shikhat, performance, technology, social media, Moroccan culture, online performance

0-Introduction

In the postcolonial, postmodern and global condition of the world and with the overwhelming flows of people, citizens shift their bodies and practices from real to what Arjun Appadurai termed, "virtual subjects of the world".¹ Within this postmodern era, social media has given rise to various singers and artists with different shapes, appearances and tastes.

¹ Appadurai, Arjun, *Modernity At Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn. :University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.



Besides, bodily presence and awareness is one of the characteristics that are central in postcolonial rejections/ resistance to patriarchy that control women's voices and movements. While resisting identities imposed by the dominant ruling ideology, dance has an encoded function to develop postcolonial subjectivity because the dancing body helps to construct the individual in society². Therefore, postcolonialism has come to serve 'subaltern's perspectives and voices which have been suppressed in the past. As the relationship between shikhat bodily performance and the role of media are among the objectives of this research, I will try to provide, in the course of this paper, a brief insight of the feminist aspect on the female body to locate my arguments.

People, in current times, have shifted their daily-lives practices, lived experiences, and styles to the virtual platform. Getting involved in cyberspace is to stay within the same embodied sociocultural structures that exist in the real world (Rheingold,1993). More importantly, individuals have started to use technology in order to step over the stereotypes and distorted images that might target them.: as George Marcus has termed the concept 'the activist imaginary' (Marcus, 1996) to manifest the ways subaltern groups embrace media, films, videos, and television to seek emancipation through world's media services. Media "forms a special case among other kinds of engagements in which a variety of marginalized subjects become involved in media themselves",³ so, shikhat have taken that media opportunity to create their own political visible space in the contemporary world structure. This in fact, allows the 'subaltern' woman to scrutinize her own traditions and look for difference within the mainstream and celebrate it (Fraser, 1990). To put that differently, media provides a free space in which shikhat can resist public discourses. The shikha performs live and her dance is recorded simultaneously. So, the physical real performance is ephemeral while the recorded one is eternal.

² Helen Gilbert, "Dance, Movement and Resistance Politics", in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds, Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths, Helen Tiffin(London and New York: Routledge.1995),341.

³ Mark Allen Peterson, *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Media and Myth in the New Millennium* (New York Oxford: Berghahn Books,2005),213.



It is worth mentioning that the body and culture are indivisible. In performance, in fact, the body becomes a bearer of cultural heritage in a palpable way.⁴ According to Grau, female dancers are profoundly linked with their physical and mental conditions. Grau states that the act of dancing is itself cultural and survives through the body of the dancer (2007, p. 109). She argues that the act of dancing is deeply cultural and centres on the body of the performer, “as a psychosomatic entity” (Grau,2007, p,20). This means that the dancer is the ‘soul and body’ of dance”⁵, including movements, senses, words and other expressions that are embedded in his/her culture. Correspondingly, dancing is an embedded art for it involves the connection of both mind and body (Sandra Cerny Minton,2003). This idea is developed by Merleau-Ponty who clarifies that mind-body are two unified entities (Ponty,1945). Here, thorny questions related to sociocultural bodily construction are dominant in shikhat’s representation on stage. Many shikhat, through their bodies and voices, invite watchers to view dancing in divergent ways in terms of movements and social occasions.

This article contributes to the current discussion about the role of shikhat’s bodily performance in contemporary media. The main objective of this paper is to scrutinize this issue in terms of the impact technology has on the transmission of their performance. By recording their performances, Shikhat, create for themselves, other ways of emancipation. Their visibility in public spaces can be read as an answer back to their social exclusion. What makes them more visible, I would argue, is the speed circulation of their recorded videos across social platforms. Unlike the past years, shikha was absolutely the carrier of disgrace and shame, nowadays, media helps, implicitly or explicitly to ‘naturalise’ their relationship with society. Media helps us to further comprehend how shikhat can produce alternative and non-oppressive representations that have depicted the oriental female body as fragile, submissive and passive.

1-Literature Review

First and foremost, the body is discursively and socioculturally constructed. The discussion around women and body is to a great extent the outcome of eighteenth and

⁴ Deborah A. Kapchan, “Moroccan Female Performers Defining the Social Body,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 107, No. 423(1994):

⁵ *Ibid*,p,20.



nineteenth century scheme of thoughts which has its roots in antiquity. The dualism of body and mind has been criticized by feminist scholars as Elizabeth Grosz states: the body has been related to women and (their) femininity, the mind, however, remains exclusively associated with men and their masculinity.⁶ This historical dualistic mind-body dichotomy; the association of women with body as passive, irrational or, to use Grosz's words (1995), "other epistemologically devalued terms", is constructed and perpetuated as being uncontaminated⁷. To put that differently, the female body is represented as penetrable; it is an object. Feminist scholars (Julia Kristeva, Catherine Clément, Hélène Cixous) have argued that the female body is sexually objectified and treated as sex object. They tried in their research to both challenge and reject all the stereotypes that silence women.

Integrating the female body as part of the feminist discussion is still very controversial, as Janet Wolff claims, its pre-perceptions as an object of male desire instead of an independent agent can always conquer and re-appropriate the body in spite of the intentions of the woman herself.⁸ That is to say that, the female body is surrounded by a culture that dehumanizes and recognizes women's bodies as subordinate, passive and object of sexual desire. While the body is mostly a contested site, it is a way of deconstructing and criticizing the patriarchal power system that control both women's bodies and media. More specifically, the body has become an essential issue for mainly sociologist and anthropologists (Turner, 2008). Bodies are the product of situated social and political discourses (Foucault, 1977). Further, when it comes to the Arab world, we find many Arab writers who have addressed the issue of female body. In their turn, they unravel the negative perceptions about female's bodies. In this respect, El Saadaoui (1980) tackles the issues of clitoridectomy, virginity, female sexuality and their negative impact on her-body. She goes further to accuse religious fundamentalist for marginalizing women' bodies. In line with this, (Rifaat 1983, and Mernissi,1987) argue that women's bodies in Arab cultures are very much linked to religion and traditions; their bodies are surrounded with concepts of shame, honour, *awra*, *fitna*, chastity and virtues. Mernissi (1987) argues that Islamic culture

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, time, and perversion: essays on the politics of bodies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1995),31.

⁷ Ibid,p,32.

⁸ Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (University of California Press: los Angeles ,1990), 120.



splits the world into feminine and masculine, private and public, veiled and unveiled. In accordance with this, Hamdar believes that the physical illness and unhealthy conditions are the aftermaths of oppressed and corrupt culture (Hamdar,2014).

Although this might be true, a shikha manifests through her body how she can take control, in the sense that she is able to select which part of her body she wants it to seduce. Significantly, the body while dancing eventually becomes a bearer of cultural legacy. Again, this physical presence undermines the conventional western stereotypes that construct oriental woman as exotic, silenced and oppressed. The body of shikha has been represented as, to use Spivack's term, "subaltern"⁹. For Spivack, the subaltern woman has always been dumbed down; her voice will not be heard since she does not have the means. The subaltern in this light denotes the inferior space women occupy in relation to the powerful male and the hegemonic colonizer (Spivack,2010). In Gayatri's terms, women are rendered mute or prevented from expressing themselves and asserting their identity by reason of that they are subjected to a kind of "double victimization", this victimization arises from the fact that they are stereotyped as weak, emotional, irrational and superstitious, all of that make them prone to be denied equality with men (Spivack,2010). From a postcolonial perspective, shikhat are seen as doubly-oppressed and marginalized by both the system and men. Within this postcolonial condition, performance allows them to assert their agencies in order to break down constructed ideologies that have been historically perpetuated. With this in mind, we can now ask the following questions: Who are the *shikhat*? What is the role of *shikha*? How are these women perceived in public? What are their forms of bodily expression?

Shikha, in fact, is an individual who dances alone and within groups. Shikha is interlocked with playing, performing and sometimes acting. Shikhat (females who dance and sing) are the ones who entertain guests in most private and public celebrations in Morocco, such as marriage ceremonies, henna parties, birth and circumcision. They typically dance on *shaabi*; Amazigh and Arab songs. A group of performers normally consists of mixed four or

⁹ Morris C. Rosalind, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, Columbia University Press,(2010).p,5.



five women and a couple of male members who play with some traditional musical drums (*the darbuka, the taarija, the bendir, the qraqeb*).

Kapchan defines Moroccan Shikhat as females who commodify their bodies and voices by performing in various contexts, they are usually interlocked with the market place where women with bad reputation appear (Kapchan,19996, p181). The shikhat in Morocco, as their name states, insinuate heavy social stigmas. A shikha¹⁰ (dancer) lives in a contradictory situation due to the fact that she is wanted and thirstily desired to be watched at, but at the same time rejected, marginalized and excluded in public. The very term shikha indicates ‘shame’ and ‘dishonour’, for it is being the icon of sexual liberation and prostitution. In her groundbreaking book, *Gender on the Market*, Deborah Kapchan speaks about the controversial position of the shikha in the Moroccan society. Kapchan argues that there is a profound relation between the performance and the body of the shikha to that of Moroccan culture. She then classifies the shikhat’s body into four major types; one of them is the competent body that skilfully master the moves of the dance, and hence these shikhat are considered as *matluqat* (easy going). The nonsense body is associated with drinking wine, smoking cigarettes and other illicit things. The exiled body stands for shikhats who are socially constructed as the epitome of all that is low and rare in society. As for the metaphoric body, it represents the ways shikhat are linguistically perceived and described as an indication to their identities.

As a matter of fact, shikhat played a significant role in defeating colonialism; they were the mouthpiece of Moroccan social and political sufferings at the time¹¹. They were very much appreciated for defending their country, and considered a symbol of resistance to the colonial invasion (like Kharboucha’s song *Lyam Al-yam*). Some historians and film makers narrate the

¹⁰ Recently, a group of Moroccan male dancers come out as ‘*Kabari Shikhat*’, dressing traditional clothes and wearing make-up like shikhat. Mediating the role of shikhat, they believe that it is way to deconstruct and change the negative connotations associated with shikhat. And it is also an act to looking at shikhat as artists and refutation to dancing as being exclusively or innately feminine activity. Claiming that even a man can be a shikha, they go for dance trainings and attend Festivals and celebrations.

Shikha is also called to anyone who trespasses the Moroccan sociocultural limits.

¹¹ Hassan Najmi , *Ghinae Al-Aita: Chi'er Chafawi Wa-Lmosiqa Taqlidiya Fi Lmaghreb*(Casablanca;Dar Toubkal,2007), 74.

pivotal roles shikhat played to defeat colonialism, and how they criticized the political system back at that time (see *Kharboucha, Mbarka Lbhichiya*).



Figure 1.¹²:Standing on Fes-Rabat carpet, moving their hips rhythmically and waving their loose hair, singing their voices and dancing their bodies.

In his outstanding book, *Singing Aita", Oral Poetry and Traditional Music in Morocco*, Najmi tries to shed light on *Rwais*'s art as part of the Moroccan traditional heritage that has been neglected and forgotten. He also focused on the socio-cultural framework and the musical poetic construction. In the second part of his book, he writes about the basic roots of the name of 'shikha' and how it is constructed in Moroccan culture, while paying close attention to shikhat performance in terms of their dance, voice, body, group performance and receptivity. In a very informative study, Alessandra Ciucci talks about the role of shikhat as being able to transform *L-àwa* texts to the audience so that to entertain participants and actively involve them in the spiritual journey. In this respect, Ciucci points out that shikhat's performative bodies are 'competent of resonating', the lyrics they sing, they provide an amalgamation of joy, excitement and passion alongside their embedded senses in their performance and voice to make the audience dance, feel, listen, taste their words and shake their bodies (Ciucci,2017,16). Furthermore, she claims that the shikha performing body is associated with '*fitna.*' *Fitna* (social disorder, chaos) in Islam is always linked to women's position in the Islamic culture. This term, in fact, defines female sexuality and body with regular threat to order. The Moroccan

¹² Studio Wislan." Hassan LkhniFri with Iman Lhajib-Fi Koktil Amazighi."Youtube video,6:14. July 17,2017. <https://youtu.be/1PrpAeOIXp8>



feminist author, Mernissi writes that *fitna* does not only refer to chaos and disorder (related to political agitation, rioting distraction or perturbation) but also to women's bodies (Mernissi, 1987,39). Moroccan folk perception is, in fact, loaded with negative attitudes towards women; the charming bodies of women are deemed as the source of seduction and disorder. That is to say, social order is threatened when a woman does not limit herself to being surrounded by her male guardian. In this regard, shikhat are considered synonyms of *fitna*, who "make men lose their self-control." In the same manner, Evgeny I. Zelenev and Milana Iliushina claim that "As a concept, however, *fitna* means mostly rebellions against the government, the disordering of political and religious instructions, and a risk to the social structure of the community¹³. A woman's body then causes threat and danger according to the Arab- Islamic culture.

Moroccan Shikhat act out as counter voices that disrupt the patriarchal ideology of women as absolute signifiers of confinement, submissiveness and silence. The Moroccan concept of what a body leads to the re-examination of ideas of public and private spaces. For this reason, crossing the boundaries or, to use Mernissi's term, the *hudud* shaped by the dominant power has always been a transgression, even a risk, not only because in doing so she is breaking the rules rigorously established by the group to which she supposedly belongs, but because she is trespassing into the public sphere, a space that has often been forbidden. As Sullivan purports, public and private spheres, in fact, define social roles and strengthen power relations between the two sexes, including race and class¹⁴. The traditional relationship between bodies and private-public spaces underlines a long-standing ideology of gender hierarchy. The visible male and the invisible female space divisions were very much penetrable in practice before the nineteenth century, and as a shikhat performs in the virtual world, she becomes hybridized.

¹³ Evgeny I. Zelenev and Milana Iliushina, "The Fitna" Concept within the Context of the Sultan Barquq (1382 – 1399) and the Karamanids Relations," *Iran & the Caucasus* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2016):180.

¹⁴ Donna Sullivan, "The Public/ Private Disinction in International Human Rights Law", in *Women's Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Roger Peters (London New York Routledge,1995),128.

2-Research Methodology

This section outlines and explains the methods of research used in this investigation. The most relevant research methodology is the qualitative design. Many research scholars (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Mason, 2002; Marshall and Rossman, 2010) state that qualitative methodology is formulated to study people and their lived experiences. In the current paper, I have relied on focus groups carried out by a coordinator in a non-structured and natural manner with a small group of participants. The group size varies between 5 and 7 persons who are all homogeneous (all of them belong to the same city, Fes). Out of ten participants, one-to-one interviews were carried out with five shikhat from different regions (the interviews were conducted via WhatsApp and in-person). Information regarding respondent's marital status, educational level and parental status are logged.

City	Interview Medium	Marital Status	Parental Status	Educational Level
<i>Ytto, Khnifra</i>	Whatsap	Divorced	Mother	Primary school
<i>Tlaytmas, Taroudant</i>	Whatsap	Divorced	Mother	Illiterate
<i>Hanane, lkhmisat</i>	In person	Single	Single Mother	Primary school
<i>Rokaya, lkhmisat</i>	In person	Divorced	Mother	High school
<i>Jamila, lkhmisat</i>	In person	Widowed	No children	High school

Figure 2. Shikhat' Backgrounds

I also logged information about focus groups participants' Demographics

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Gender | 4 Females and 5 Males |
| 2. Respondents Occupations | 3 Students and 6 employed |
| 3. Educational Level | 7 University, 2 High School |

Since shikhat' videos have widely been spread on social media, the data is supported by using analysis of those online videos and YouTube videos comments. The videos I have



chosen are uploaded online from 2009s up to the contemporary time, they are performed by the most searched and famous online female performers belonging to different regions, cultures and places. While conducting this research, I analyzed 10 videos that I downloaded so that I could save records for advance analysis. At the time of writing, these videos have between 90,000 and 12million views. I also based this study on visual analysis for the videos and thematic analysis for the notes obtained from analyzing the videos, as well as from the interview's transcripts.

In this study, the researcher relied on online ethnography from June 2020 to September 2020, for she regularly visited YouTube and Facebook pages where shikhat' videos are uploaded. The researcher also observed audience's comments and interactions with female performers. Significantly, these chosen methods surely helped her investigate how shikhat' position in society is perceived, interpreted, experienced and understood both offline and online.

Accordingly, this article adopts symbolic interactionist approach, for it is related to the examination of language and meaning. A number of aspects has been analyzed such as dress codes, lyrics, the use of different colors that serve to distinguish ethnic separation, and the commonly held viewpoints and perceptions among people towards shikhat. The study also makes use of the gender approach, which aims to give voice to women to be recognized.

The Research questions coming out of this paper can be phrased as follow:

- How has the status of shikhat been affected by the use of audio-visual media?
- Is there a resistant room for these marginalized groups?
- What attitudes Moroccan's have towards shikhat?
- What are the driven factors for being a shikha?

3-Results and Analysis

Having situated our discussion within the existing debates and formulated methodological and theoretical backgrounds. I shall now analyse the findings and find answers to the research questions.

Title	Audiance	Costume Fashion	Social Occasions	Media	Rythm of Celebrations
a-Hicham bajit nayda m3a chikhat	Mixed audiance	shikhat wearing white <i>Ihram</i> , coloured shining embroidered belts and <i>Aboks</i>	Marriage ceremony	Youtube/Tv	a-Quick rhythm cycle ↓ fast compound duple=60 beats bm , focus on dancing
b-Kamal El-Abdi-Taarida	No audiance	Dark pink Caftans	Video clip	Facebook pages: - <i>Imazighen de la'atlas</i>	b-Fast compund duple, very fast and lively and then a bit slower
c-Shikhat Tarodant Bh'ayr dalya	Mixed audiance	<i>Mozon</i> ¹⁵ (Hip belts)	National festival of Dekka and Rythms	- <i>Tashlhit</i>	c-Extremely fast 90 beats↓ Focus solely on singing
d-Shikhat Khribga	Mixed audiance	White and Yellow Caftans, Sabniya'	Marriage Ceremony	<i>Shikhatona</i>	d-Slower to faster duple from 20 to 60 bpm↓
e-L-abat Baaziya	Mixed audiance	Caftans	Birth ceremony	Spaces/Locations	e-A bit slower from 20 to 60↓ fast beats
f-Shikhat Atlas	All-males	Red Caftans, <i>Mozon</i>	Marriage Ceremony	-Weeding Ceremony rooms	f-faster compound beats, tempo increases 76bpm ↓
g-Shikhat Taza	All-Females	Red and black <i>Mozon</i>	Marriage Ceremony	-Moroccan Tents	g-Very Fast beats 90 bpm↓, Focus on dancing
h-I-Abat Marakesh Bnat rhamna	All-females	Red <i>Mozon</i>	Marriage Ceremony	-Hotels/Nghtclubs	h-Fast beats 70bpm↓ , focus on singing and dancing
I-shikhat Bnat Antar	All-females	Green <i>Takshitat</i>	Birthday party/ A'ita celebration	-Homes	I-Start Slow from 30 bpm to 60 bpm ↓Focus on singing
J-Ghita' shikhat group	All-females	Yellow caftans	Engagement celebration	Crude/Musical Instruments -Rattles -Drums,Empty cans ,Tea Glass lute,tambourine -Snare drum -Violin,piano	J-Moderately fast drumbeats, then slow, from 70 to 40 ↓ focus on dancing
		Red and green caftans -Jewellery			

Figure 3. In/tangible elements and Atmosphere of celebrations

¹⁵ *Mozon* are embroidered belts put around hips and they are made of threaded wool embellished with sequins.



3-1 Analysis of Shikhat’ videos as a Living Authentic Dance

Evidently, shikhat’ involvement with technology leads us to cast light on the interaction between their performance and the audience. Shikhat’s interaction can be divided into two major aspects that are live performances and recorded performances. The context, in fact, differs between the two performances because they have an impact on spectators’ psychosocial interactions (see Bolls, 2012). In this sense, Coulry (2010) distinguishes between live and recorded performances. According to him, live performance is that bodily presence (occurring now) whereas recorded performance is similar to watching a film and less interactive. For the majority, live performance provides its distinguished interest, passion and social interaction. It is through live performances that shikhat and audience come together in real spacio-temporal and social encounters. Within this study, both contexts are involved, we notice throughout the analysed videos that many of them were live performances, then recorded, and then shared. Besides, we notice huge interaction, closeness, and shared emotions between shikha and audience members. Here, a sense of social bond and attention are cultivated. Clearly, audience-performers can be interpreted in terms of this dichotomy passive/ active, direct/indirect, human/non-human, social/individual encounters. In other words, the shikhat’s bodily presence in the live space aims at stimulating sense and engaging spectators. Recorded performances, however, result in perceptions and interpretations maybe totally different from the real ones. Thus, the making of live performance is socially and politically significant for it, according to John Blacking, constitutes a community more with emotional side than sociocultural one (1987, p,129).

Cha’abi dance videos literally mean authentic local Moroccan music. Shikhat highlight their embodiments to sociocultural aspects of the dance. Hence, it is always a reminder to the Moroccan tradition. Shikhat Khnifra and Taroudant are, for example, considered representatives of the Moroccan heritage on the national stage. They are usually accompanied by *bakhoor* (a traditional Moroccan incense burner) as for it leaves a long-lasting amazing smell. Markedly, Moroccan shikhat are very good examples of traditional/heritage dance. Throughout a tentative examination and regular watching to their videos on social media, we notice that, in contemporary Morocco, shikhat belong to different cities and ethnic groups. They become very popular both nationally and internationally. *Shikhat Awniyat, shikhat Stat,*



Shikhat Bnat Antar, Shikhat Beni Melal, Shikhat Tarodant shikhat Atlas, shikhat weld soba, Shikhat Moha amzyan, shikhat Khribga, shikhat wad zem, shikhat Oumgil, shikhat Dkala, to mention but a few, are nowadays among the most famous shikhat on Moroccan social media (figure 2). Significantly, the names given to these groups are carefully chosen because they represent their original locations. In the same way, Kapchan (1994:18) argues that technology and media popularize shikhat from a variety of regions in Morocco with their distinguished styles, so shikhat are speak persons for ethnic and regional identities; defining the richness and diversity of Morocco.

Furthermore, shikhat also perform in both rural and urban areas, moving from cities to villages. Throughout the videos, we can see shikhat performing in various settings, either with women only, or with mixed sexes. Their embodiment to the spirit of celebration generates an enthusiastic emotional response to the audience invited to get involved to participate in the performance. During celebrations, shikhat move every part of their bodies; they move their hips very rapidly. Now, speaking of data, each video was evaluated in terms of its mode, with a view to explore the common features. Through the analysis of the ten videos of shikhat, we notice that their coloured costumes have an internal significance inside the Moroccan society. The colours they choose for their caftans distinguish them from other shikhat who belong to different regions. Their clothes are symbols that reflect their cultural identity and indicate their role and function in each ceremony. In others words, clothes are “an indicator to culture in which we live in”¹⁶. Shikhat also wear gold jewelry around their necks and hands, thick embroidered belts, and make-up ‘(the painted bodies)’. It is quite understandable then that the performers’ movements, physical appearance and the relationships between dancers and society commonly construct a stereotypical image towards females¹⁷, which can be regarded as a challenge to the order associated to the regulation of the female body and their roles as mothers and housewives.

¹⁶ Patricia Anne Cunningham and Susan Voso, *Dress and Popular Culture* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996),1.

¹⁷ Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (Macmilian,1992),63.



Furthermore, shikhat sing about different issues that are related to people's sociocultural state, through which they relate themselves. Their songs deal with different topics such as love pain, sexuality, sufferings, nostalgia and alienation, men's oppression, *suhur* (sorcery), poverty and corruption. In these instances, shikhat sometimes borrow archival materials as an inspiration for new creative songs and performance. The act of returning to the past to make sense of the present, Stuart Hall argues, is not a fixed point that we can simplistically retrieve, but instead it is "retrieved by reconstruction within the discursive structure and not outside it." In an all-females gathering, Fatiha Lwza a former leader shikha, expresses for example grief and loss, other female performers join the chorus and play drums:

Wayli –mi ,Lmima matat liya

Oh mother, my mother passed away

Kindir l-zehri

What I should do to my bad luck

A-yroni bshikha

They insult me for being a shikha

A-yroni blmtalqa ,bhal hobk yalmima makayn

They insult me for getting divorced, oh mother there is no true love like yours

Wa-ala wladi mahmoni li-ayroni

For my children, I don't care for their judgements

Warbi- A-wni ndoz had lmo-anat

Oh god, help me overcome this misery

Khlitini whdi what h-ad mayswl a-liya

You left me all alone, nobody asks about me

Khlwani L-aila,l-- khot, wl- khwatat

I was left by family, brothers and sisters

Warani braniya fbladat nas

I am stranger the countries of foreigners.”¹⁸

In these videos, shoulder shaking, a common movement among all shikhat’s performance, stretches in fluidity performing the rhythmic movement motion of the dance, as it refers to the traditional principle of “uncaring” about others judgement. A sense of equilibrium rhythm happened, women here swing their heads back and forth (*tahdar*), waving their hands from right to left, up and down and vice versa, shivering their hips, breasts and waist. The camera gliding along their bodies, as they move, the cameraman zooms and focuses to a great extent on their breasts, waists, feet, hair and clothes.

Shikhat dance in union (see **figure 4.5**) with the same regular steps, which make the viewer watch different bodies performing the same movements. One shikha performs like the other and this is due to the regular vicariously dance training. Once the unison finishes, they get away from the pair or group formation and carry on with their individual movements but still acting the same. One by one, with their provocative movements, they begin reaching the audience for tips (100dh approximately and above). While the audience clap their hands, shikhat heads slides back and forth with windmill arms.



Figures 4.5.¹⁹ Moments at wedding and festival celebrations

In the following (**Figure 6**), a huge number of males are sitting in a circle, while the shikha is dancing in the middle. Shikhat’s performance is explicitly or implicitly about the body, her

¹⁸ Cha’abi Awniyat. "Fatiha Lwza : Toghani w’tabki," YouTube Video,5.01.

<https://youtu.be/uUascJjWeLc>

¹⁹ Amazigh Press , "Shikhat Atlas ",August 23,2020.

<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/ryadw4wwNhs/mqdefault.jpg>

body moves both in space and time. As we notice in this picture, the audience eyes are focalized upon shikhat's legs, hair, arms, breast, neck and back as she moves, turns, runs, sways, and leaps.



Figure 6.²⁰ Creating a space for her; swaying the body from side to side, bobbing the head up and down, left and right

The Skikha's movement stir a sensual response in its audience. Her gestures expertly amazed the audience as they sing and clap to her. Through displaying her body, she is eager to satisfy the audience's pleasure and desire. Hence, the viewers are in the role of the voyeur in relation to the shikha's movements; her exhibition serves to fulfil the audience's interests. In fact, it would be of great importance to analyse the relation between her body and public space. Displaying her body and beauty in public can be seen as a way of resistance to patriarchal forms of power. In addition, this can also be understood as of exposing her sexual identity; her body belongs to her and not to others. She is no more *Mahjouba* (invisible) but free like a bird that flies for better conditions, and to assure her own existence, consequently, shikhat's presence publicly manifests that the divisions between male and female spaces are blurred.

Their movements are purely Moroccan instead of imitating what Said calls 'hegemonic western culture' (1979, p,8). It shows that they appreciate their own culture and traditions. Moreover, as we notice, dancing involves from them an extreme turn-out of the whole body, it shows how they are well. Through their performance they embody the cultural norms in the broadest meaning of the term. This indicates the overlapping relation between their physical

²⁰ Dima Toop2, "L'ewd Lahmar Shikhat Taza 2018," Youtube video, 1:58. December 02,2017. <https://youtu.be/zbrpzQv7YBA>

bodies and dancing, culture and identity. This, actually, calls attention to the thought of the performer as an agent (an essential one), for it reflects the way the performer is perceived by people and by herself.



Figure7.²¹Hassan Ikhniфри's Shikhat dancing in a wedding ceremony. Swaying their heads in a rhythmical manner.

Shikhat, through their bodies, are presented to the audience to transmit and express their ideas and feelings. The same argument was developed by Sondra Fraleigh, when she argues that dancers are accustomed to their bodies, and how certainly dance drives them to practice everyday movements, learn new ones and embody each act fantastically and professionally²². The comments of viewers construct meanings about shikhat. Their dancing bodies are re-creating cultural attitudes related to gender. This is exactly what Haraway explores through her concept 'cyborg manifesto', reflecting on how technology is altering our lived experiences, identities and social contexts (1991, p,116).

3-2 Moroccan Attitudes towards Shikhat

This section reveals the survey conducted with two focus groups, five males and four females from Fes city. Expressing their attitudes towards shikhat, their performance is reflected in the discussion below.

²¹ Amazigh Press, "Chikhat Chaàbi Raqs Maroc," December 11, 2017.

<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/lgyb2zCVU4Q/hqdefault.jpg>

²² Sondra H. Fraleigh, "A Vulnerable Glance-Seeing Dance through Phenomenology," *Dance Research Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1991), p.13.

Extract one:

Moderator: ‘According to you, who are Shikhat? And what do you think about them?’

Rachid: ‘Shikha is a woman who is doing a job but recently shikhat are becoming merely prostitutes.’

Khalil: ‘There is no doubt in my mind that a shikha is a whore.’

Rachid: ‘(interrupting) come on, you keep watching them (laughed).’

Ayoub: ‘For me, it is an art and a job.’

Omar: ‘I disagree with you brother Khalil, it is not necessary to be a prostitute, there are some honorable shikhat who sing meaningful songs.’

Rachid: ‘As I said it is a job but the problem is that we live in an Islamic society and it is full of taboos like “Hshoma” (shame)...’

Khalil: ‘Emm, can you marry a shikha?’

Omar: ‘I will never accept because she broke the borders of society. So, she will disobey me (laughed).’

Rachid: ‘I hold nothing against them but I completely refuse marrying her.’

Khalil: ‘There are some shikhat who expose their bodies in public just to get married. And the majority of them are “*m’lhma*” and have attractive sexual bodies and that’s what men love.’

Omar: ‘Our weakness point!’

Group: [laughter]

Rachid: ‘It depends if she is “mastora” wears long baggy caftans. Its fine to sing and entertain people at ceremonies solely for women.’

Mounir: ‘I agree with Khalil, her body affects us and makes us go through different stages of fancying and foreplying them. Last year, I was invited to a wedding and shikhat were there too. I saw a very gorgeous shikha, she was performing like a goddess. I honestly couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was stunning. I watched her

show for as long as I could and with every rhythm of music, that woman became even more attractive as she rapidly shakes her body’

Ayoub: ‘Unlucky you then (laughed)! Listen sister, dancing is not valued in our society though there are some amazing schools for dancing, because the problem is in people’s mindsets and being a shikha is not accepted to the majority of them.’

Moderator: ‘Alright, another more question. Do you enjoy watching shikhat’s videos on social media?’

Rachid: ‘Yes, I do and adore them.’

Khalil: ‘I always watch and enjoy them, and I love that thing...(laughed).’

Moderator: ‘What’s that thing?’

Khalil: ‘I meant some parts in their bodies. Those women they show everything ...their breasts, their butts.’

Ayoub: ‘Khalil is philanderer, Yes I do too.’

Group: [laughter]

Extract two:

Moderator: what are your attitudes towards shikhat? What do you think about them?

Fadwa: “there are many decent jobs to look for rather than being s shikha. For in Islam, it is forbidden for woman to expose her body in the public and unveiled. Being a shikha has never been a good choice. And there are some shikhat who have other roles than just singing and dancing, like prostitution”

Meryem: “Shikha is always related to *hshoma*, though we love watching them but we can’t accept them.”

Salma: “In my countryside, it’s quite important to bring shikhat in wedding ceremonies. But sometimes what I notice is that some men take their wives home and they come back to continue watching and making comments about shikhat as if it is inappropriate for their wives to watch shikhat in their presence”

Houda: “For me, shikhat doing a job like any other jobs. The problem is that some people are schizophrenic in the sense that they love watching shikhat’s dance but they insult them at the end. She added, “Not all shikhat are ‘prostitutes. And I personally love to dance on their videos and sometimes I imitate them”

In the light of the views exposed above, it is clear through the informants’ discussion, that shikha in the eyes of the majority is associated with ‘prostitution’, for it refers to ‘whore’ or ‘prostitute’. Throughout their arguments, there is ample evidence that shikhat still hold a social status. As they differentiate, either explicitly or implicitly, between shikha as a “bad wife” because she lacks criteria of the virtuous wife who reveals herself to merely one man. Whereas others define shikha as a woman who is doing ‘art and doing her job. This is actually confirmed by the popularity of shikhat’ attendance in many public and private ceremonies disseminated by media, which is continuously consolidating its position within Moroccan society. However, some hold contradictory position for they desire to watch them privately but never accept them publicly. In line with these viewpoints, the comments of viewers on YouTube and other websites (such as *Imazighen de L’atlas, Shikhatona*), can be divided into two groups. The first category deemed shikhat as a source of enjoyment, relief and entertainment. Many of them write “God bless you, amazing performance, Greetings to Amazigh Shikhat”, “I adore this folkloric dance”, “I want to bring you to my daughter’s marriage ceremony.” Their fans express how much they enjoy their singing and dancing under each video on YouTube. On the contrary, other viewers’ comments perceive shikhat as entertainers but at the same time as sexual objects, to use Mulvey term, ‘being-at-look-at-ness’ and erotic. They comment, “May god guide you to the straight path”, “So hot, she has a sexy attractive body”, “You will be punished by God for what you are doing, this is *haram*.”

Through a video call I had, via WhatsApp with Ytto a Moroccan shikha originally from Beni Melal but she lives in Khenifra, I discovered what a shikhat might feel regarding peoples’ perceptions towards her. She states: “*they talk like that because they don’t know our circumstances. If they really know, they won’t insult or judge us. You know sister, I am divorced with a child and I am working on my whole family with this job-I spend on my family (mother and two sisters). We, as shikhat, are harshly condemned by people. They should put themselves in our shoes. This is a run-of-the-mill job that earn me a living.*” The three shikhat



Hanane, Rokaya, and Jamila, who work in one group, added “ *we are keeping our reputation good, we neither drink alcohol nor smoke in public, we do respect ourselves.* ” I first met those shikhat twice in two marriage ceremonies in the neighbour. They were six women but I only approached three of them. They told me that they have been working in-group since 2008, and that they have performed in various celebrations. Hanane was the most beautiful shikha among them; she has blue eyes, black long hair and curvy body shape. Sitting all together, she told me she had a daughter outside of marriage. She escaped her family’s house and lives with her child in their own. I wondered and asked about the reason behind their involvement in dancing. They responded, “*We are talented shikhat, we know how to dance and sing. Why don’t we invest in ourselves, but honestly the financial factor is the main reason, we have to.*” Yes, Jamila, who laughs loudly before answering any question, made a point of that their aim is to entertain people and gain good money. Hannane added, “*We don’t want to earn illicit money and we distance ourselves from any sexual relations.*” The common things between the three of them are their constant movements from one place to another, their family abandonment and responsibility to afford money for themselves and children. The latter is the major push factor behind their decision to perform.

3-3 The Shikha’s Show and the Digital World

Creating spaces for their performances, social media presents a significant affordance to its users. The presence of shikhat on social media as well as “festivals and folklore spectacles ‘louders’ the shikhat’s image so that she can become a symbol fit for regional and national identity” (Kapchan, p200). As Kapchan argues;

Perhaps even more significant than the shikhat's use of the media is the media's use of shikhat. State-produced television broadcasts air performances of regional shikhat groups in an effort to give voice and body to the different regions of an ethnically diverse nation -- the shikhat of the Souss (a Berber region), the shikhat of Tetouan, the shikhat of Taroudant. Consequently, shikhat are no longer symbols of shame but instead personification for regional and ethnic identity. Their art has been recognized, therefore their presence highlights an essential part of Moroccan folkloric and national identity (p,209).



It is important to consider that shikhat's use of technological devices to broadcast their songs as well as their performance has to some extent disconnected them from the chains of taboo words such as *hshoma*, shame. With their various songs, voices and performances, Shikhat are therefore perpetuating their national and mainly regional identities, traditions and rituals. They have created groups that consist of eight or ten women, usually pioneered and directed by a female leader. They created their own revolutionary songs often using their personal and emotional lives as starting point. Their popularity on social media has been broaden and have made them pivotal to the main distinguished ceremonies in people's lives including births, betrothment and weddings. That is why, with the flourish of social media, the more shikhat are famous, the more prestige the host family gains.

The shikha shamelessly opens her mouth in front of the public, singing lyrics that discuss various issues related to women's rebellion and sexuality:

Waghadi nkhrij baz mno *baz mno*

"I will go outside without his consent

Wanjib lfakya baz mno *baz mno*

I'll bring fruits even if he doesn't want

Wa-na shikha baz mno *baz mno*

I am a shikha against your will

Wandir rasta baz mno *baz mno*

I'll do dreadlocks against his will

Wa-ya khalid baz mno *baz mno*

Against Khalid's will

Waraki kwiya, Diri li biti baz mno *baz mno*

And you are a powerful woman, do whatever you want despite his obligations

Wasiri à'nd mk baz mno *baz mno*

Visit your mom against his will

Wadi mak lhmam baz mno *baz mno*

And take your mom to the *Hammam* against his will



Wajibi Nqasha baz mno

baz mno

And bring the *Neqasha* against his will

A-tiha lflous baz mno

baz mno

Give her money against his will.²³

These lyrics are performed by a group of shikhat from Marrakech. Playing with small drums, as the tempo increases, other women join in the chorus. Actually, they articulate about what they want from men. The lyrics indicates that they are expressing and challenging the hyper-masculinity and male authority in their lives. In this song, women space and public space is blurred to make them brake away from any kind of restriction. Significantly, the *hammam* as mentioned above, liberates the shikha's body, voice, and provides her with a free space in which she can discuss various topics. As Naaman-Guessous points out, in the *hammam*, women create social networks, tittle-tattle, they talk about the latest fashion, clothing styles, and make remarks about their bodies freely²⁴. They also make a reference to *Neqacha* (tattooing maker) as a symbolic desire to celebrate and design their bodies.

The shikha also discusses female's sexuality openly:

A bebe-ya bebe r-tab lghofala

“Baby, oh baby with soft hair (pussy)

Ytkatlo A-lik rjala

Men fight over you

Bebe, habibi mol rich

Baby, my love with feathers

Bebe sift rjala l'okasha

My baby sends men to ‘*O'kasha*’ prison.”²⁵

²³ Story Instabreties , “ Baz Mno” YouTube video,2.19. December 18, 2018.

<https://youtu.be/uDrqsak8LIE>

²⁴Soumaya Naamane Guessous, *Au-dela de Toute Pudeur: la sexualité féminine au Maroc* (Casablanca: Eddif :Maroc, 1988).

²⁵ ViNeSB en SouDa, "Bebe Ha bebe," You tube video,2.7. https://youtu.be/4ISPJg_Lk8



In the video, the skhia's attractive body (she shakes) expresses and conveys her sexuality. In an all-females gathering, Shikha makes reference to women's sexual organs, and all the expressions that incite sexual desires. In an interview with Tlaytmas, a shikha from Tarodant, confesses that "our bodies are oppressed and exploited, we sing about sexuality through a loose use of language because we feel free and have fun." This shows that a shikha's loose language becomes her site of resistance and oppression at the same time. This result ties well with what Kapchan argues, shikhat' loosely language and erotic bodily movements are among the reason behind their marginalisation in daily life. And thus, they are associated with immodesty, and aligned with the subaltern and disenfranchised.

The body, indeed, is central while addressing shikhat. Through the interviews conducted with the five shikhat, they emphasised that body type matter in their work, and that there are some criteria for shikhat' bodies, hence they should have:

- Facility in movement, flexible and the capacity to embody the choreography the way intended.
- Physical attractiveness above intellectuality requirements; aspects of female body (height, body fatness) must be attractive

As one interviewee said:

○.l .Λ ✱✱l✱.l .Ɔ:ℳℳℳ ran ad zznzan afulki

∴○ ○.l .Λ ✱✱l✱.l ℳℳℳ. ur ran ad zznzan lmihna

They want to sell beauty They do not want to sell craftsmanship

According to the these skhikhat, the attractive body has become the capital for every woman who is willing to become a professional shikha for it offers them a successful dance career. It is a form of empowerment especially in a digital era. Although there are some shikhat who have succeeded despite these prohibitions, still the socio-cultural prohibitions are dominating. They are either glorified, mocked and snubbed on the basis of body.



4- Discussion

With regard to entertainment as a trade, shikhat are doing a job like any other job²⁶. Nonetheless, there are many views who disagree with this argument. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, female performers were conceived as exotic, their dance was considered outrageous and indecent. Orientalism plays a vital role in perpetuating the image of Arab women; either oppressed imprisoned in the harem or exotic. But what disturbs female performers is not the romanticized and distortion of orientalist dominant misrepresentations but the manner they are perceived and maltreated by their own community. In this light, the massive culturally fulfilled images of shikhat, is not pure and innocent. Despite their essential presence in different sorts of celebrations, they are still denigrated and not honoured. In an interview with Tlaytmas, a shikha from Tarodant, points out that we “*go hand in hand with drinking alcohol, smoking, sex and all the illicit things that come to your mind.*” In the same vein, Lila abu-loghod has noted, for women to gain self-respect, they should “distance themselves from sexuality and its anti-social associations.”²⁷ Now, why does society stand against and condemn the shikhat? Does society condemn dancing as a job or shikhat as women? Is this due to the job itself or the prevailing of gender ideology?

From the findings listed above, we can say that shikhat are condemned because they do not respect the social limits; bad reputation and negative connotations are constructed around women who work in this field. The findings also bring into light the presence of shikhat in public spheres and their ability to dance their bodies, which is in itself an act of resistance, as Hannah Arendt points out “human life can only be meaningful if people can engage effectively in the public sphere²⁸. Their physical presence in various public spaces underscored the patriarchal and western discourses about Moroccan women as being a submissive subject always restricted to the private space. When performing to the public, shikhat in fact become

²⁶ Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade Like Any Other”: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 2002),180.

²⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (University of California Press,2016),119.

²⁸ Bryan S Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, London: Sage Publication, (2008),2.



vulnerable (sometimes attacked physically and symbolically). Thus, their virtues and honour are tarnished. These dancers are magnets for they attract a large number of spectators, especially men. Yet, they are condemned and associated with many pejorative terms by men. Their bodily performance, through the use of media, can be seen as a political act for it conjures up questions about gender relations, visual and invisible bodies. Their chance to produce sensual and embodied performance simultaneously underlines mind-body dualism. They construct their agency and start to create alternative ways of bodily representation of freedom. Their performance through social media highlights their alteration to masculine domination of media. Here, we notice a new subversion to traditional norms via technology. Perhaps this can make a shikha gets a sense of freedom towards her body.

The results of this research show that shikha as a term has a stereotypical heaviness, she is regarded as a 'prostitute'; as expressed in Aziz Salmi's film *Bent Shikha*(2009) (the Daughter of Shikhat). In the beginning of the film, we get to know that a female character hides the fact that her own mother was also shikha. The sense of shame and dishonour associated with the term shikha is what drives her to hide and never talk about her past. Her resistance to comply with shikhat' oppression and the speech that marginalizes her is manifested at the end of the film when she chooses to sing in a marriage ceremony in memory of her mother. Her musical speech can be interpreted as a means of breaking up the language, which denies her identity and voice. As Hélène Cixous points out:

Voice-cry-Agony-'the spoken' word exploded, blown to bits by suffering and anger, demolishing discourse: this is how. She has always been heard before, ever since the time the masculine society began to push her offstage, explaining her, plundering her...'”²⁹(1996, p,94).

It is a significant moment when El-Alya could make her voice be heard. A challenge to the sociocultural norms that have silenced her for many years of estrangement and considers her as the 'Other', but now she becomes the "self" who has a revolutionized voice and body.



It is quite understandable that the body of shikhat is central because they are “publicly exhibiting the body for profit.”³⁰. Consequently, the positive aspect of their dance includes earning of salaries. With the use of social media, shikhat have become successful and are able to make a good career that allow them to have a decent life. Consequently, shikhat are not only physical bodies, they go beyond that to be the representatives of Moroccan heritage. Following the same line of thoughts, dance is a resource that supports and elevates them, and at the same time resist the patriarchal discourse. In this view, Helen Gilbert argues that dance is an active self-constituting procedure.”³¹In the light of this, dancing or ‘drawing with the body’ is a tool to refuse the oppressive system imposed on skhikhat.

Within a postcolonial era, shikhat’ performance can be seen as a political means to affirm cultural diversity. They also promote a strong sense of solidarity. Therefore, the act of dancing is a resistance to the domination of cultural colonialism. I can also add that shikhat usually use media to change traditional perceptions, which is definitely a feminist choice and an act of developing their own feminist praxis. Thus, they advocate public interests and change the traditional role of spectators. Audience members are becoming active, their participation in social platforms, intentionally or unintentionally, contributes to shikhat’ recognition in real-virtual realities.

Conclusion

To conclude, media intervention has broadened shikhat popularity. However, media is both a friend and a foe for shikhat, a friend for it has widen their performance spheres to larger cities and towns, contributing to an increased status of shikhat, and a foe because it has promoted their mis-representation. Despite the erotic movements they preform, we can say that they are a historical icon; shikhat are symbols of national and cultural identity. The skhikha’s body, in fact, goes beyond what is considered heritage; in Cuicci (2017) view, a female performer represents a counter discourse of being merely a ‘house bird’ hidden behind doors. She manifested herself as both a body that travels through the dance area, and a mind that is

³⁰ Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (University of Texas Press:1995),185.

³¹ Helen Gilbert, “Dance, Movement and Resistance Politics”, in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*,eds, Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths, Helen Tiffin(London and New York: Routledge.1995),344



capable of creating, interpreting or memorising various songs. Through engaging her body virtually, a shikha is asserting agency and subverting traditional representations of the gendered bodies.

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Appendice

Appendix 1 Interview Guide

- 1- Can you tell me how did you start? When and for how long have you been dancing?
- 2- How did you learn to dance?
- 3- In what sense being a shikha impacts your life?
- 4- What are your attitudes towards being a shikha?

Appendix 2: List of Videos Referenced in Shikhat' Styles Table and Songs

- Kamal El Abdi – taarida, Available online on <https://youtu.be/wFJNEnnjzFI>.
- Chikhat Tarodant Bhayr Dalya. Available online on https://youtu.be/EGmynWJvV_I
- Chikhat Taza 2018. Available online on <https://youtu.be/zbrpzQv7YBA>
- L'abat Baaziya Shikhat. Available online on <https://youtu.be/Dw-oAXwy4Mk>
- l-Abat Marakesh Bnat rhamna. Available online on <https://youtu.be/eW4aP6afbbU>
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- Chikhat Khouribga. Available on <https://youtu.be/fN8C-xeZqe0>
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- ViNeSB en SouDa, "Bebe Ha bebe," You tube video. https://youtu.be/4ISPJjg_Lk8



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- Story Instabreties , “ Baz Mno” YouTube video <https://youtu.be/uDrqsak8LIE>
- Amazigh Press , "Shikhat Atlas. " Youtube video <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/ryadw4wwNhs/mqdefault.jpg>
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