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Ahidous dances: moving to and fro between Morocco and France, the Middle Atlas and the Ariège

Balladine VIALLE

Migration routes bring families who cross the Mediterranean face to face with new challenges if they are to transmit cultural activities and discourses related to strategies for preserving their identities – the latter being as diverse as they are shifting. Such families, who come and go between both shores, are concerned to create a bridge between the two, and to make ideas, actions, words, objects and dances travel with them. Dances, together with the songs and music accompanying them, provide signs of belonging or separation; it is on these I would like to focus, and in particular, on the gender reversal taking place in the learning of traditional *Amazigh*[1] dances, known as the *ahidous*.

A migrant community of Berber origin[2] lives in the town of Foix, in the Ariège department of France, and it was there that I was able to share the daily lives of these families, first as a relative, then as an ethnologist. I subsequently went to meet the families of my interviewees, who had remained in the Moroccan Middle Atlas, their country of origin, and were centred round the small town of M'rirt. My fieldwork, conducted between 2008 and 2017, was facilitated by my knowledge of the Arabic and Berber languages and my participation both in day-to-day life and in the celebration of feasts. Having been immersed directly in the female world, first as a girl and then as a young woman, I was there able to observe the processes by

1 *Amazigh* is the name for the ethnic group and language known in the west as Berber.

2 The Berber community in Foix includes around forty families who come from the surroundings of M'rirt, Knenifra and El-Ksiba-Beni-Mellal. Those I shall focus on here come mainly from around M'rirt.

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which customs were handed on, before subsequently negotiating a new situation for myself as observer of the men's side. The *Amazigh* dances proved a highly auspicious subject for analysis, because they were at the centre of migrant community life, appearing at weddings and other gatherings, but also featuring in reunions, when people returned to Morocco.[3] This article follows the same path as the one I took myself, from the Ariège to the Middle Atlas, first of all treading in the footsteps of migrant families during their summer return to their home country, and then returning alone, for long months outside the summer period. The *Amazigh* ways of living, during these constant comings and goings between two poles, form the main focus of my research.

A wedding *ahidous* in Foix

One morning in spring 2016, on the little council estate in Foix, the staccato rhythms of the Berber tambourines announce that festivities are about to begin. A marriage is going to be celebrated today.[4] The husband is ready and waiting in his parents' apartment. His best man takes him by the arm to accompany him outside, and lead him to the home of the parents of the woman who, in a few hours' time will become his lawful wife. The tambourines resound, expressing the pleasure of all those participating in this union. The mothers gather round the bridegroom's mother as she watches her son move off. The women's bodies create a block, prompting the wedding's protagonists to enter the dance circle.

The *ahidous* has just been reborn in the migratory space. The dance is performed in a circle, or a line, by men and women who move their bodies to the sound of the tambourines.[5] The rhythms and chants are started up by some of the dancers. The first begins to strike his

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3 The toing and froing of *ahidous* dance between France and Morocco, was the subject of my Masters 2 degree. In my thesis, I analysed the processes by which the skill was passed on between different generations of migrants.

4 This description is based on my own observations as a participant in the wedding ceremony.

5 *Alloun* or *adjoun* in Berber, *bendir* in Arabic.

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tambourine with the staccato rhythms of the *ahidous*, while at the same time moving his shoulders according to an agreed-upon choreography; then all the other participants join in with him, performing the same steps and shoulder movements. The musician begins to sing aloud, and all the other dancers repeat the words in chorus, until another song is initiated by the same singer or by somebody else. By positioning themselves shoulder to shoulder, the participants create a collective dancing body, which moves up and down and left to right, in unison. While the shoulders of each of them move up and down in harmony, their legs and feet are swung forward and then effect a slight movement towards the right, in order to make the circle of *ahidous* participants turn back on itself. "To play *ahidous*" is the term used, because the dance is seen to be closely linked to playing the instrument and to the singing which accompanies it. It creates a single whole, acquiring its meaning through the meeting of these three skills which, in combination, give rise to the dancing circle.[6]

In the bride's apartment, there are smiles and tears all at the same time. The women sing of her departure in the *Tamazight* language, while others provide rhythm for their dances by using both hands to strike the tambourines brought back from their home country. They hold the instruments vertically, at chest level, and while one of their hands grips the base, tapping against it with the fingertips, the other one beats the centre. Then one or two men of mature years enter the circle. The gathered women indicate their arrival by exchanging glances, and acknowledge them with smiles – these men are newly arrived in France, having learned to play the instrument in their homeland. The men seize the tambourines – which the women are happy to hand over – and take control of the rhythms. The circle then becomes mixed, with mothers and girls dancing in step with the newcomers. The fathers, however, remain on the sidelines, or else completely in the background, outside the buildings. They observe the dances, which they practised in their youth, but from which a veil of modesty, justified by age, status or religious practice, has now detached them. But already, further away on the estate, "the bride's *ahidous*", "*ahidous n'tislit*", signals that the bride is

[6] Miriam Rovsing Olsen (1997) gives a very fine description of this dance's symbolism, which recalls the importance of forming a single body in the ritual.

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expected and should depart for the village hall, from where she will go on to her husband's home.

Now it is time to meet. It is only at this moment that the alliance between the two families is concluded and the agreement between them sealed in a shared choreography, to the sound of the tambourines. The relatives encircle the couple with their dancing bodies. They maintain the circle for a while, to symbolize the ideal of a solid union, which grows or shrinks but is never broken. The dancing circle is judged, by the dancers themselves but also by the spectators gathered around them, to be "beautiful" if the participants keep up the rhythm and remain dancing shoulder to shoulder for as long as the music lasts. If the circle becomes smaller, and then disintegrates, because some dancers withdraw to become spectators around the circle, the participants are considered to be very poor dancers.

What is experienced in France at these times of festivity echoes what is shared in the Moroccan Middle Atlas using these same dance movements. But, whether in France or Morocco, learning to dance, whether as a woman or a man, learning what is allowed or forbidden in public, results from a long period of initiation in body movements and choreography, from childhood onwards. In the Moroccan Middle Atlas, everyone has trodden this path of apprenticeship, and everyone is or has been a dancer. Dance is a marker of status and of life's different stages; dance enables meetings to take place and separates age groups; dance inspires men and defines the position of women.

Learning the *ahidous* in Morocco: a matter for young boys and then for men

In Morocco, boys learn by watching and imitating dancers during wedding celebrations. The young admire their elders and jostle each other to obtain the best view of the circle. As they grow older, they acquire the right to warm the instrument over the fire, which is lit next to the dancing area. In learning to stretch the goatskin affixed to the wooden circle of the tambourine, they draw closer to the world of the dance and to their own eventual entry into the circle. Initiation is thus achieved in stages. However, in the Middle Atlas, and more specifically between the town of M'rirt and the surrounding rural

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areas, these stages differ. Approaching the dance by means of the instrument is more frequent in the countryside. Boys learn to make it, play it and look after it, and at the same time to dance with it. Music is learned along with the dancing and singing, as a whole set of skills, which makes sense when the three are combined. Then it is time for improvisation. In cities, the instrument is lent or bought, but very rarely hand-made. As for the songs, they are repeated but rarely invented. Those known as "real" dancers (*amchad* (singular), *imchaden* (plural) are the best *ahidous* players. The *imchaden* are present at all the weddings in the home country – they are the ones who start up the rhythms, maintain the dance, control the songs and have the ability to train up younger ones. They come from the countryside where, from early childhood, they have become familiar with this total artwork, until they are masters in their turn and models for the younger generation. The *ahidous* therefore acquires a different aesthetic value depending on the environment where the skill has been learned.

Women's dances in Amazigh territory

In the Middle Atlas, little girls are left free to play round about and especially inside the dance circle when weddings take place. They are also the closest spectators and recipients of the sets of dances performed by mothers, aunts, sisters and adult female cousins in the intimacy of their homes, while the men are outside. Small girls thus come to hold this "secret" which turns women into excellent tambourine players as soon as the men have left, as well as extremely skilful dancers, memorizing to perfection the male chants coming from outside. They sometimes even create improvisations around the steps as well as the words. But outside the walls of their homes, they remain eternal novices when faced with the "masters" of the dance. By internalizing this juggling of positions between the spaces and times for dancing, they learn and accept that a woman must be able to conceal her dancing skills in the presence of men, so that the latter preserve a dominant public image through their handling of the

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instrument and traditional choreographies.[7] Both here, and throughout the dance training, the whole dialectic of male-female relationships is played out – with its divisions of power and counter-powers, but also the reversal of positions according to the spaces within which boys and girls are led to assert themselves.[8]

Thus it is that, even when ousted from the legitimate and official spaces where they can learn to dance, women nevertheless create time to practise, in the gaps between everyday domestic tasks or when preparing for a wedding. In the wedding context, cooking food, trying on bridal outfits, arranging decorations for the place of ceremony, all present so many pretexts for initiation. Learning to dance as a young girl therefore means learning to be a woman within this *Amazigh* society, in which male domination has to be replayed and made visible in exterior spaces through the circle of the *ahidous*, but also thwarted and made laughable in the secret world of women, in the safe shelter of interior spaces.

In the Middle Atlas, weddings are punctuated with these moments when gender relationships are acted out. Mockery, parodies, freedom of bodily movement and speech, are the counterpart of externalized official norms. And if, at this time of celebration, women are able to act in a way which they would normally eschew, this particular moment is still subject to the control of the group. The limits of verbal and bodily modesty seem to be extended, but they are defined differently. It is primarily through looks exchanged between women that reminders are given of what is acceptable in male company, and what is tolerated only in spaces reserved for females. Thus, it is not only knowledge about relationships with the dancing body, but judgments and sanctions too, which come first and foremost from women themselves; this is because, from childhood onwards, they have internalized the strict codification of the places and times when the female body may be liberated, in its display of sensuality and

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7 In their study of the Moroccan High Atlas, Jouad & Lortat Jacob (1978) immediately put women in the position of followers rather than innovators. As perpetual novices, they are said to be encouraged to follow the rhythms set by men.

8 See Aline Tauzin (2007) on the subject of dance as a way of learning how to be a woman.

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rhythmic and choreographed mobility. When performed outside, the mixed dance circle is governed by men, and it is they who will set the benchmarks for what is allowed and what is forbidden.

Women's body movements are therefore controlled on all sides, but allowed greater freedom to move during these times of festivity; the contradictory implications of the female body in this society, where it is sometimes highlighted and sometimes veiled, are thus revealed. In fact, at weddings, not only can women dance with agility and endurance, but they also wear finery that emphasizes their presence in the circle. Their bodies which, in daily life, have to be hidden from the male gaze (voluminous, sober garments, restrained gestures, calm voice and covered hair), on the occasions when they dance are clothed in the most beautiful dresses, and decked with jewels and scarves of shimmering colours, arranged with exquisite, sparkling brooches.

The rule and the leeway it allows

For migrant men who have become fathers, the restraint referred to above is partly explained by the implications of participation in the dance circle. This circle is vital not only because of its function as a demonstration of joy at the union being celebrated; in the homeland, it is also thought of, and experienced, as a valuable place for meeting and making approaches, through a discreet play of seduction between young people of marriageable age. In the rural areas of the Moroccan Middle Atlas, villages are separated into "exterior" spaces (lanes, fields, forests, and so on) which are seen to be masculine, and "interior" spaces, associated with the feminine (houses, inner courtyards, a spring in the village centre, etc.)[9] Meeting places far from the watchful eyes of elders are rare. Older people consider that any encounters between young people should be monitored, so that future marriages can be chosen by their elders (who are "wiser") rather than dictated by the hearts of young people carried away by passion. In towns, girls have to justify their movements and are more

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9 For the role of spaces among the Kabyle people of Algeria, see also Yacine 1999: 2.

encouraged to stay at home, or else in the alleyway in front of their houses under the gaze of their female relatives and neighbours.

Celebrations such as weddings are therefore very auspicious times for meeting "suitable" partners, although these still take place under the group's supervision. In fact, only those close to the families of the married couple, such as relatives and friends from the surrounding villages, are invited to dance in the circle. Different strategies are then used by young people who wish to enter the circle, as soon as the sound of the tambourines is heard. Conflicts can arise from these attempts to play *ahidous* without having been invited. A man who breaks the rules is suspected of wanting to seduce a young girl and run off with her, thus violating the space of the circle. Young girls, on the other hand, do not enter just any dance circle, and especially not at unspecified times. Dance circles indoors or in well-lit spaces are the ones prescribed for them. Circles which are in shadow, where the movements of the participants cannot be clearly seen and into which "strangers" may enter, are perceived to be dangerous. If a girl deliberately chooses to take up position next to a young man outside her family, with whom she might potentially form an undesirable union, disapproving looks and rumblings of discontent are not slow in coming – for the dance is performed, observed and listened to, but it is also described, commented upon and judged. The reputations of good or bad players, of prudish or flighty girls, are made and unmade, then circulated and transformed in the comments describing the high points of the ceremony.

Young people nevertheless pass discreet messages to one another by means of the dance. The girls have learned, this time from their girlfriends or female cousins, how to brush up against the boy they admire without appearing to do so; and how to dance next to him, thus sharing an intimacy that is normally prohibited. But seduction also occurs through the songs accompanying the *ahidous*. Usually, it is the young men who start off the singing within the mixed dance circle, and it is then taken up by everyone. But they insert a message into the songs, in the form of poetry full of metaphors – a message directed at their beloved; so that now, the song which seems to speak of love in its widest sense, is really addressed to one of the girls in the circle and expresses the attachment that cannot be declared

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elsewhere. This means that only the two young people involved can understand the hidden meaning behind what is repeated in chorus by all the participants.[10]

Recreating *ahidous* in the Ariège

The migratory experience disturbs these essential functions of the dance. The places for meeting and flirting are more numerous in France, depriving the *ahidous* circle of its primary function. The locations are no longer the same, and the learning relationships between people of different age groups are totally disrupted. Where young men are concerned, any link to the creation of musical instruments disappears, as does the link with older cousins for the purpose of handing on skills. Those who were born in France and have grown up there no longer have anyone to copy. Although mothers continue to dance in indoor spaces, and in so doing hand on the movements and rhythms of the *ahidous* to their daughters, the fathers who possess these dancing skills have distanced themselves, thereby perpetuating their country's tradition that, once they become fathers, they should abandon their tambourines. The custom, as expressed in Morocco, demands that fathers with sons who are of an age to learn and understand the dance and all its implications – as a place for meeting, for seduction, for expressing discreet words and gestures forbidden in the times and places of everyday life – forsake dancing in order to leave this space of controlled freedom to the younger generations.[11] In following this rule, migrant fathers are in the situation of owning skills they can neither practise nor pass on, while their sons, with cousins and siblings who have also grown up in France, are deprived of the customary means of acquiring these skills from their peer group, that is to say from cousins, friends and brothers who are a little older than them.

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[10] On this point, see Idali-Demeyre (1999) and Yacine (2006) with regard to Kabyle society in Algeria, and Abu Lughod 2008 [1999] for the Bedouins of Yemen.

[11] There is also the religious aspect which, according to certain interpretations of the founding texts of Islam (Quran, Hadith) makes it impossible to reconcile a strict practice of Islamic precepts with dancing, especially for fathers.

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Male youths therefore find themselves confronted with the disappearance of the channels through which dancing skills are transferred. It is only a few cousins in their homeland, where they return during the summer, who are now capable of passing on a few scraps of knowledge to them. However, the novices attract a barrage of mockery from those in the know at home: "*The holidaymaker who dances looks like someone trying to walk on eggs.*" These jokes are even turned into songs, and sung by everyone during celebratory get-togethers. Young boys who were born in France sometimes look on from a distance when their mothers and sisters practise in the family home. But usually, the rules of modesty between the sexes preclude this. Their expatriate status therefore means that boys living in France are "life-long novices", while their contemporaries in Morocco, particularly those living in the countryside, can hope to become "*imchaden*".

However, while the loss with regard to male initiation is manifest, for women the dances are still very much alive: they are felt to be necessary for developing strong markers of their migrant identity. For women, therefore, the concern to pass on their traditions is stronger, and reverses the rules for the apprenticeship in dancing which prevail in the homeland. The little girls who formerly learned to dance the *ahidous* in secret have, in France, become mothers who seize upon the place left vacant by men, in order to ensure the survival and perpetuation of the *ahidous*, and thus preserve a link with their home country. It is the girls who are on the receiving end, not only through play, or in secret, but directly through their mothers,' aunts' or neighbours' practice and personal, first-hand teaching, of "the correct way" to swing the shoulders, up and down; to enter the circle in France; to follow the rhythms of the other participants; and even to handle the instrument.

Male dances, which in former times offered a space for socialization between the sexes, but also an opportunity to learn male roles and assert masculine identity, have now become circles deserted by men, and filled by women. This means that these former spaces for constructing and developing masculinity have become places for

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increasing women's prestige,[12] particularly since, among French migrants, dance is perceived as a female activity which a boy can only practise at the risk of losing a little of his masculinity.[13] Boys who have been born and educated in France find other activities elsewhere, in social spaces outside the Berber community (among colleagues, friends, at school, etc.), which allow their manhood to develop; for them, it no longer involves the *ahidous*.

Thus, if the *ahidous* is able to travel between the Moroccan Middle Atlas and the Ariège, it is only through shifts in the process by which it is handed on. While, in Morocco, the dance was an essential locus of learning and expressing masculinity, in France it has been taken over by women, who have become the sole guardians of this dancing art. It is mothers who are responsible for creating a space for dialogue between children in France and those in Morocco; between what is done in France and what is imagined as taking place in the home country. When fathers distance themselves and mothers seize hold of the tambourines; when sisters reveal their dancing skills while their brothers remain clumsy and too timid to enter the circle, the *ahidous* reveals the change that has occurred in the very desire to perpetuate an *Amazigh* identity. However, migrant men newly arrived in France, may come and fill the gap left by their peers, by entering the circle and taking the tambourines from the mothers' hands to reintroduce the male element into *ahidous* dances. As we have seen, the perpetual movements between Morocco and France are constantly redrawing the contours of this art. We can therefore say that the *ahidous*, whether rejected or re-appropriated, assumes a real dynamic in the way affective matters are handled, as well as in the negotiation of relationships between men and women, parents and children.

Translated by Rosemary RODWELL

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12 Cynthia Becker (2006) also emphasizes the central role of women in ensuring, from one generation to another, that a visual art continues to find expression. Her particular focus is on weaving.

13 Huesca 2004; Fisher & Shay 2009; Marquié 2011. However, outside of the traditional scenic setting, French hip-hop dancing appears to be an exception to this rule – cf. Dole & Strausz 2010; and McCarren 2013.

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