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**Speaking, Silence, and Transmission:
Issues of Oral Heritage in Maghrebi Societies**

الكلام، والصمت، وانتقال الموروث:

قضايا التراث الشفهي في المجتمعات المغاربية

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Abstract:

This article explores the significance of oral heritage in Maghrebi societies through the interrelated notions of speech, silence, and transmission. It examines the ways in which oral forms, including folktales, songs, proverbs, and life narratives, contribute to the preservation of collective memory and cultural identity. The study further investigates silence as a meaningful cultural practice shaped by social values and norms. Particular attention is given to the mechanisms through which oral heritage is transmitted across generations and adapted to changing contexts. Finally, the article reflects on the challenges posed by globalization and highlights the role of literature in safeguarding oral traditions.

Keywords: Oral Heritage- Transmission- Silence- Maghreb- Literature

الملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال أهمية التراث الشفهي في المجتمعات المغاربية من خلال مفاهيم القول والصمت والتناقل بوصفها مداخل أساسية لفهم آليات حفظ الذاكرة الجماعية وصون الهوية الثقافية. ويبحث في الأشكال التعبيرية الشفهية المختلفة، كالحكايات الشعبية والأغاني والأمثال والشعر الشعبي والسير الحياتية، ودورها في نقل المعارف والقيم والتصورات المتوارثة. كما يدرس الصمت باعتباره ممارسة ثقافية ذات دلالات اجتماعية ورمزية تتجاوز مجرد غياب الكلام. ويناقش المقال كذلك الكيفيات التي يُنقل بها التراث الشفهي عبر الأجيال وما يطرأ عليها من تحولات. وأخيراً، يتوقف عند التحديات التي تفرضها العولمة والرقمنة، مبرزاً إسهام الأدب في حفظ التراث الشفهي وضمان استمراريته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التراث الشفهي - النقل - الصمت - المغرب العربي - الأدب

1. INTRODUCTION

In Maghrebi societies, orally transmitted narratives occupy a fundamental place in the preservation of collective memory, ancestral knowledge, and cultural traditions. Tales, legends, proverbs, songs, life stories, and testimonies represent various forms of expression passed down from one generation to another, thereby ensuring the continuity of a shared cultural heritage. Through these discursive practices, communities preserve not only knowledge and values but also a worldview and a collective identity. According to Amin Maalouf « is not given once and for all ; it is built and transformed throughout one's life. »¹ Clifford Geertz also addressed the issue of oral heritage in the following terms : « Man is an animal

suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun ; i take culture to be those webs »²

However, this process of transmission does not consist of a mere reproduction of the past. It involves complex mechanisms of selection, interpretation, and sometimes concealment. Certain experiences, beliefs, or values are highlighted, while others remain in the shadows, deliberately silenced or gradually forgotten. Thus, speech, silence, and transmission emerge as three inseparable dimensions in the construction of oral heritage.

This reflection leads us to question how Maghrebi societies build and perpetuate their collective memory through the subtle interplay between what is spoken, what is left unsaid, and what is transmitted. Indeed, oral heritage constitutes a

dynamic space in which memory is shaped as much through expression as through silence. It is not a fixed legacy but rather a living body of cultural practices that constantly evolves.

Several questions then arise. How can oral heritage be precisely defined? What are its modes of transmission and its social functions? Encompassing tales, songs, proverbs, narratives, folk poetry, testimonies, and all forms of verbal expression, oral heritage is characterized by its fluid and evolving nature. Every narration, performance, and act of speech introduces variations that reflect the historical, social, and cultural transformations of communities. Consequently, oral heritage appears as a privileged space where memory, identity, creativity, and the continuous reinvention of traditions converge.

2. An Overview of oral literature genres

Folk tales occupy a central place in this heritage. As vehicles of moral values, life lessons, and collective imagination, they enable communities to pass on a particular worldview to younger generations. Songs, whether ritual, religious, festive, or work-related, also constitute archives of social memory. They accompany significant moments in people's lives and help strengthen the sense of belonging to a community.

Proverbs, for their part, represent a condensed form of popular wisdom. Through brief and vivid expressions, they convey the accumulated experience of generations and serve as guiding principles in social interactions. Life

stories and personal testimonies help preserve the memory of historical events, individual experiences, and collective trajectories that do not always find a place in official history.

Popular poetry, particularly rich in Maghrebi societies, constitutes another pillar of oral heritage. Whether in the form of *melhoun*, Bedouin songs, or improvised poetry performed during ceremonies, it expresses the emotions, aspirations, forms of resistance, and collective imaginaries of social groups. It also reflects the linguistic and artistic creativity of communities.

Finally, oral heritage encompasses all forms of verbal expression that contribute to the transmission of memory and identity: legends, riddles, ritual formulas, prayers, lamentations, genealogies, traditional knowledge, and historical narratives. Together, these manifestations constitute a valuable intangible cultural heritage that ensures continuity between the past, the present, and the future, while contributing to the preservation of cultural identity and diversity.

Having attempted to highlight the importance of orality in societies, another question naturally arises: how does oral heritage oscillate between speech, silence, and transmission?

2.1. Speech, Silence and Transmission

Oral heritage is built through a constant interplay between speech, silence, and transmission. Far from being a simple act of communication, it constitutes a

complex space where what is said, what is left unsaid, and what is passed on all contribute to the preservation of collective memory.

Spoken language represents the most visible dimension of oral heritage. Through tales, songs, proverbs, historical narratives, and testimonies, communities transmit their knowledge, values, beliefs, and worldview. Spoken language keeps alive a cultural heritage that, without it, would risk disappearing. It also ensures continuity between generations, making storytelling a privileged vehicle for collective memory.

However, oral heritage is not limited to what is spoken. It is also marked by silence. Certain experiences, events, or pieces of knowledge remain deliberately unspoken. These silences can be linked to historical traumas, social taboos, cultural norms, or power dynamics. In North African societies, for example, certain issues concerning intimacy, the status of women, family conflicts, or painful historical episodes may be shrouded in silence. Silence then becomes a form of language in its own right: it protects, preserves, conceals, or resists. Between speech and silence lies the act of transmission. Transmitting does not mean faithfully reproducing content inherited from the past; it also means selecting, interpreting, and sometimes transforming what deserves to be preserved. Each generation makes choices: it values certain stories, forgets others, and adapts some to new realities. Thus, transmission is a dynamic process that relies as much on memory as on forgetting.

This oscillation between speaking, remaining silent, and transmitting reveals that oral heritage is never neutral. It is the product of social, cultural, and historical mechanisms that determine what can be recounted, what must remain hidden, and what will be passed on to future generations. Speech ensures the circulation of memory, silence marks its limits and tensions, while transmission guarantees the continuity of an ever-evolving heritage. It is precisely in this fragile balance between memory and forgetting, expression and restraint that the richness of oral tradition resides.

In other words, we will examine:

Silence as a cultural and social phenomenon:

- The unspoken aspects of collective memory, namely social taboos and silence linked to historical or family traumas.

- Silence as a form of protection:

- Preserving honor, privacy, or the sacred

- Implicit transmission of values.

- Contemporary threats to oral tradition:

- Disappearance of storytellers and keepers of memories

- Effects of globalization and digital technology

- Decline of traditional practices

What are the methods of transmission? What are the stakes and what are the prospects?

- Modes of transmission:

- Families, domestic space, celebrations, and rituals

- Schools, universities, and academic research

- Safeguarding intangible heritage

- Collection and archiving

- The role of cultural institutions
- Reinventing orality today
- Orality and digital media
- New artistic and literary forms inspired by heritage, which we will explore through literature that transforms fleeting moments into lasting traces, paradoxically seeking to preserve what is disappearing.

How?

3. Orality and the challenge of writing

Indeed, transmitting orality to new generations through literature requires preserving the living spirit of the spoken word without transforming oral heritage into a static or purely folkloric object. Literature can play a mediating role between tradition and modernity by reinventing oral forms rather than simply reproducing them statically.

First, writers can integrate the characteristics of orality into the literary text: rhythms of speech, repetitions, proverbs, popular expressions, songs, dialogues, or embedded narratives. This presence of the voice helps maintain the living and collective dimension of the oral heritage. In North African literature, in particular, many authors reintroduce the voices of storytellers, grandmothers, or folk narrators to restore a cultural memory transmitted orally.

Second, transmitting without freezing implies creative rewriting. Orality must not be preserved as a static relic; it must be able to engage with contemporary concerns. Writers thus revisit myths, tales, and traditional figures to address contemporary issues such as identity, exile, memory, and the status of

women. Literature then becomes a space for renewing oral heritage. Furthermore, the use of languages plays a crucial role. Alternating between French, colloquial Arabic, Amazigh, and popular expressions helps preserve the linguistic richness of oral traditions. This hybridity gives the text a musicality akin to spoken language and connects younger generations to their cultural heritage.

Finally, the literary transmission of orality can be strengthened by contemporary media: theatrical adaptations, audiobooks, digital narratives, poetry performances, and storytelling festivals. Literature is no longer limited to the written book; it can become an interactive space where the voice reclaims its place.

Thus, transmitting orality through literature does not mean preserving the past as it was, but rather making oral memory a living material, capable of transforming itself and continuing to speak to new generations as we will attempt to verify through the forms of expression of the rite, for example, in the Maghrebi novel, notably *Le Démantèlement* by Rachid Boudjedra, *L'Enfant de sable* by Tahar Ben Jelloun and *Phantasia* by Abdelwahab Meddeb. But first, what about oral discourse and text?

3.1.Oral discourse and text

Conceived as both reasoning and a social and historical fact, discourse is apprehended not only as a linguistic unit, but also as a dynamic site of conflicts and contradictions. This presupposes that the text is understood as a dialogic space, which Bakhtin defines in these terms: «Being a site of dialogism

where all social discourses are staged, the literary text is a privileged field of observation where a language, a culture, a representation of the world is put to work. »³

The text would then be, in Bakhtin's words, «a place where discourses, propagated by social groups in conflict, clash, intersect, and respond to one another. « Thus, the literary text, which stages the discourse of the world and social discourse, is immersed in the latter and is produced according to social codes»⁴ Thus, the literary text, which stages the discourse of the world and social discourse, is immersed in the latter and is produced according to social "codes".

This process of textualization and contextualization is considered a product of social conditions. A text does not emerge from nothing. Its structures generate its meanings by implying a reference to the external: to the sociohistorical, the non-textual, the intertextual, and the interdiscursive. In other words, the social and historical "substance" of the text refers to a reality external to it, governed by a society.

Omnipresent in every text, social discourse requires, in effect, a certain anonymity of the discourse of which society is the subject. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the presence of a circulation of meaning between the text and its social environment.

The text feeds into this contextualization, while simultaneously shaping it, in a relationship of participation and interaction, with which it maintains a dialogical connection.

Maghrebi literature, in particular, is characterized by the intertwining of the social and the literary. Maghrebi texts are compact messages imbued with a dense social charge. Since its founders, such as A. Sefrioui and M. Dib, M. Feraoun, D. Chraïbi, R. Boudjedra, A. Meddeb, and T. Ben Jelloun, among others, took up this literature, literary criticism has consistently addressed major recurring themes, such as the pyramidal and patriarchal system of the societal structure, the precarious condition of women, and the customs and traditions that govern many aspects of daily life.

3.2. Literature as a contextual witness

Even today, literature bears witness to the ever-renewed presence of all these issues, with their underlying ideals and contextual underpinnings. Thus, Maghrebi fiction draws upon this social foundation, which manifests itself through the act of writing itself. Its adoption by Maghrebi writers is significant in a body of work where multiple discourses engage in dialogue. The novels of Rachid Boudjedra, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Abd Elwahab Meddeb exemplify this creative textualization, which seems to be realized through its immersion in social discourse.

Ritual thus represents an anthropological wellspring upon which entire segments of society rest. According to Salvatore Abbruzese, ritual is « the true locus of dialogue between subject and institution. »⁵ Within this framework, we recognize the role of ritual outlined above: ritual is a social behavior conforming to a

collective practice that does not possess a utilitarian or rational purpose. The Maghreb world, too, is built upon the « symbolic grammar » constituted by rituals, which guarantee a social bond, that is to say, the feeling of belonging of individuals to a symbolic entity constituted by shared values and activated by diverse forms of experiencing “living together.” Nevertheless, this belonging to the whole invokes the sacred with its mythical, dogmatic, and mystical beliefs, which Boudjedra, Ben Jelloun, and Meddeb seem to denounce. This is what we will attempt to analyze throughout this thesis. Thus, defined as « cultural, » ritual finds its connection to humankind itself and is, without a doubt, a field of application in literature. Through the evocation of ritual, Rachid Boudjedra, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Abd elwahab Meddeb seem to introduce Maghrebi culture into the world of writing, adapting it to an aesthetic, political, and social context, and revitalizing elements of the past.

Echoing this body of anthropological studies, we can state from the outset that the effects of ritual are common to all societies at various periods in their history. What differs, however, are the perceptions. To this end, we set ourselves the task of examining whether rituals respond to the search for meaning among Maghrebi writers, notably Rachid Boudjedra, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Abd elwahab Meddeb, who, situated within an Arab-Muslim civilization, are once again imbued with the cultural heritage of these rituals, regardless of their beliefs. What do

they do with this legacy? Can it be considered an organizing element of cultural representations and identities? Or as a potential space within the literary imagination?

3.2.1. Society, a transmitter of rites

Boudjedra, Ben Jelloun, and Meddeb, among others, write about and describe a society that leads individuals to submit to religious and cultural structures. These structures are interpreted as reflecting divine will and a world order. These writers seem to show that this interpretation results in a gradual subversion of these rites, as is readily apparent when reading the novels that make up our corpus. Indeed, this demoralization appears to manifest itself through the rites of circumcision⁶ and death, for example, through ceremonial practices and the repetition of a verbal, gestural, and postural protocol. The attitude adopted by society transforms this ritual into a spectacle, a theatricalization of behavior.

Maghrebi writers critique this "social theater" in which characters are supposedly condemned to adopt morally reprehensible behaviors in order to give the impression that they are following the rules. The social practices evoked by the authors in **Le Démantèlement**, **L'Enfant de Sable**, and **Phantasia** imply that society, heir to family tradition, reminds the latter of its age-old role. We will better understand this by studying our corpus. We will see that within **Le Démantèlement**, **L'Enfant de Sable**, and **Phantasia**, the structure of the Maghreb is reflected, with its overlapping classes and the

possibility of social mobility. Consequently, we will witness social upheavals in which women are the instigators. These changes appear in the descriptions of the role of women in the works of Boudjedra, Ben Jelloun, and Meddeb.

3.2.2. The ritual that reveals one's self-perception

Defined as a space, as the site of a shared imaginary world embraced by writers of diverse origins, nationalities, and cultures, the Maghreb is, according to Abdélkibir Khatibi, «plural. »⁷ Thus, Maghrebi literature is permeated by cultures whose influence is fundamental to literary works. These works offer interpretations of Maghrebi society, of relationships between individuals, of shared or created, reinvented, and reappropriated common imaginaries. We find this plurality in Francophone Maghrebi literature. In this regard, Maghrebi literary production in French has been deeply engaged with the issue of cultural identity. To conduct this analysis, we deemed it important to provide an overview of Maghrebi writing and its concerns. Indeed, from 1920 onwards, Maghrebi novels in French attributed to religion the value of an Islam «Refuge value»⁸ alongside family and tradition, the only attempt to recover an identity stolen by colonization and the protectorate. They establish this form of writing within a logic of denunciation, which is to say that these writers attempt to articulate their relationship to the community, and thus express their way of experiencing a given context where social practices derived from a number of religious rites are

established as rules of life. It is this particular relationship to novel writing that we will study, essentially taking into account a situation marked by the yoke of tradition, and at the heart of which, as both actors and witnesses, our three writers produced their texts.

In their relationship to the community, Boudjedra, Ben Jelloun, and Meddeb seem to shed certain traditional elements of identification, such as ancestral ties, in order to recover a more personal identity, a plural, particularized self-image that breaks with the traditional attachment of the self to a collective same. Writers are an integral part of their society, as Kateb Yacine so aptly put it, informing us that «the writer cannot abstract himself from social life. »⁹

However, through their description of traditional rites, the writers denounce certain excesses, as Michaux Bellaire notes: «When one knows Moroccan Islam, one realizes that it is mainly constituted by the cult of local marabouts and by a quantity of superstitious rites which have little in common with revelation [...] »¹⁰

Through these practices, society, in the eyes of these writers, becomes a prison-like universe characterized by imprisonment in all its forms: suffering, deprivation, dishonor, lies, and greed. The hold of ritual is crucial to our study, as it is denounced by authors who advocate for liberation. It is from this perspective that Kateb Yacine stated, «In a country like ours, where urgent problems arise, we must take a clear stand. »¹¹

The various texts by Rachid Boudjedra, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Abd elwahab Meddeb present the reader with diverse forms of imprisonment, which we will analyze later. The representation that Maghrebi society gives of itself leads us to say that it enacts a kind of parody of life.

The Maghrebi writer appears to be active in the discursive chain where the positions of writer and reader intertwine under the influence of social realities. It is in this sense that the remarks of Alemdjrodo Kangni reinforce these observations. Indeed, he believes that:

The author, imperceptibly becoming, through a phenomenon frequent in Francophone literatures of Africa or the Maghreb, a reader of a reality (the famous cultural fabric) in which his work takes root, ties coded knots to be untied so that all the strategies of collectivization of the work, of its taking charge of a history that sometimes goes back so deep in his consciousness that it is almost impossible for him to escape it, may finally appear. »¹² Maghrebi writers seem to want to untie and undo knots that society has put in place.

Conclusion

Literature plays a fundamental role in transmitting the cultural, historical, and identity-based heritage of societies. Through stories, tales, legends, novels, poetry, and personal accounts, it preserves collective memory and ensures the continuity of knowledge, values, and traditions from one generation to the next. By committing oral traditions to writing, it contributes to their preservation against the risks of

disappearance linked to social and cultural transformations. Literature does not simply transmit the past; it reinterprets it, enriches it, updates it, and makes it accessible to new generations, thus fostering dialogue between heritage and modernity. It therefore appears as a true vehicle for safeguarding, promoting, and renewing heritage, participating in the construction and strengthening of the cultural identity of peoples.

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¹ Maalouf, Amin. (1998). *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. Grasset, Paris, France. P.23.

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³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, (1977), "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language", Minuit, collection Le sens commun, Paris, p.96.

⁴ Ibid, P.100.

⁵ Abbruze, Salvatore (2004) "Behind the rite: questions on religious rites", in Dianteil, E., Hervieu-Léger, D and Saint-Martin, I. (eds), *Ritual modernity. Political and religious rites of modern societies*, L'Harmattan, Paris, p.219.

⁶Regarding this rite, Malek Chebbel (2006) speaks of a question of order, for him, "[...] a society which has made its members accept, for so many centuries, the necessity of circumcising males (despite the pain and the risks) no longer asks itself "meta-bodily" questions," in "The Spirit of the Seraglio - Myths and Sexual Practices in the Maghreb," Petite bibliothèque, Payot. Paris.P.342.

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¹¹ Gafaïti, Hafid,Ibid, p.78

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