

I.  
BETWEEN COLONIAL AND  
ETHICAL NOISE

The French Speech Archives,  
rwa's sound,  
and aural mediation

Extract from: Gilles Aubry, *Sawt Bodies Spaces*.  
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O flower of the desert! Where is your shelter  
when the heat gets intense?  
O flower! Give my regards to the one tattooed  
with henna and tell her I'm in love with her!  
O hunter! You haven't set the goats free yet,  
please don't kill them!  
O traveler! Don't come back with counterfeit  
money, rather bring gemstones!  
O hunter in the forest! Can I accompany you  
to go in peace?  
O hunter! If you find a doe with her fawn,  
please don't kill her!  
O flower of the desert!  
- Song by raissa Abouche Tamassit,  
Pathé recording, 1920s<sup>1</sup>

These lyrics stem from a song by *raissa*<sup>2</sup> Abouche Tamassit, a female singer from Tiznit in southwestern Morocco. Recorded by the French record company Pathé in the 1920s, the song was presented to me by the Agadiri singer Ali Faiq while I visited him in 2017. The song provides a possible introduction to some of the topics that have preoccupied me during my sound research in Morocco: the struggle of local populations for subsistence under the oppressive effects of French colonial occupation (flower of the desert); the economic transformation and modernization of a rural society (*counterfeit money*); and a local sense of interconnectedness with environmental life (please don't kill her!), which today we might call "ecological consciousness." To Ali Faiq, however, the recorded song was significant for yet additional reasons. He retrieved it online from the "Pathé collection of Arab and Oriental 78 rpm recordings," made accessible in digital form by the French National Library (BNF) in 2013.

<sup>1</sup> Translation from Berber-Tashlhit language into French by Ali Faiq, further translated into English by Laura Lot.

<sup>2</sup> The music recordings discussed in this chapter relate to *rwaïs* oral expression (masculine singular *rwaï*; female *raïssa*), a term designating professional, itinerant musicians from the Berber-Tashlhit speaking area of southwestern Morocco (Souss). The term *Tashlhit* designates the Berber dialect spoken in the Souss region, *Ishlhin* its inhabitants. Both terms are etymologically related (Schuyler 1979).

Containing rare non-commercial recordings captured by Pathé for the French Speech Archives between 1911 and 1930, the collection is described in an article by Hinda Oujjani (2013). The paper was brought to the attention of Ali Faiq who was able to identify a number of rwais songs in the collection previously unknown to most music experts in his community. As a musician and as a local cultural agent committed to the perpetuation of rwais expression in the Souss-Massa region Ali Faiq went on researching deeper into these recordings, sharing the songs with peer musicians and releasing a CD containing new interpretations in 2016. The tracks featuring Abouche Tamassit are an important discovery, Ali Faiq declared, because only male artists were remembered so far as part of the early rwais history.<sup>3</sup> These recordings also show that Abouche Tamassit was not just an excellent singer but also a very good string instrument (*lotar*) player, which is unusual for a raissa, even by today's standards. Ali Faiq thus recognizes in Abouche Tamassit someone who dared to affirm herself as a female artist within a conservative society. Finally, the Pathé recordings matter to Ali Faiq because they preceded by a few years the records commercialized in 1929 by the Gramophone company, so far considered to be the oldest existing rwais music recordings.

To my knowledge, Ali Faiq's project is a unique case of music re-appropriation from digitized colonial sound archives in Morocco—also because online access to such archives is a recent phenomenon. As I will elaborate in more detail, his self-initiated archival research allowed him to re-introduce these songs to his community and to propose a new narrative of early rwais sound history. By studying the archive through “close

<sup>3</sup> Ali Faiq's statements in this chapter are transcribed from my personal communication with him between October 2013 and March 2019 at his home in Ait Milk near Agadir.







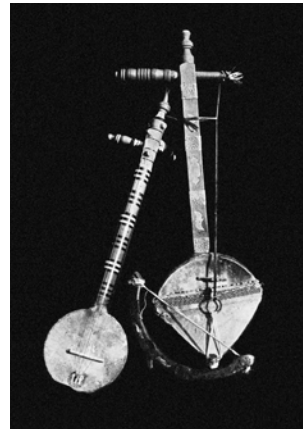
Raissa Abouche Tamassit, circa 1925.

listening” (Hoffmann 2015) and analyzing its metadata, Ali Faiq became progressively more familiar with French colonial sound epistemology. This allows me to discuss his practice in terms of sonic pluralism, where potentially oppressive knowledge is acquired in order to be critically re-purposed for different ends. Beyond a mere re-appropriation of cultural artifacts, sonic pluralism entails a re-appropriation of knowledge—in this case on sound archival techniques, historiography, as well as circulation of this knowledge through cultural mediation. Drawing on these observations, I further embark on a re-examination of the history of sound technologies in Morocco and North Africa, aware of the fact that this history is often reduced to “a story of Western influence” (Steingo and Sykes 2019). If local musicians had no or little control over technologies of sound reproduction in the beginning, examples show that rwais musicians soon began to take advantage of the social and technological transformations brought by modernity under French occupation, albeit within certain limits. I consider how man-machine relationships were consciously reflected in rwais songs, as part of wider changes ongoing in Moroccan society in the early twentieth century. Through their particular social position as itinerant bards, the rwais often acted as mediators between various groups of populations, and between various instances of knowledge and authority. I discuss these aspects through the lens of sonic pluralism, arguing that rwais *sound* was characterized by social and epistemological mediation, collective authorship, and by a particularly situated *ethical noise*. I consider how such a history is necessarily framed by the promises and anxieties brought by modernization

and colonialism, offering thus a different account of sonic modernity in Morocco.

### RWAIS EXPRESSION IN SOUTHWESTERN MOROCCO

Rwais itinerant musicians live in the Berber-Tashlhit speaking area of southwestern Morocco, a territory which is part of today's administrative region of Souss-Massa. Dominated by the Anti-Atlas mountains, the region faces the Atlantic coast. Its capital is Agadir. Rwais musicians' use of the *rebab*, a monochord fiddle of West African origin, and the *lotiar*, a four-stringed lute guitar of Arab origin, distinguishes their music from other genres in Morocco (Schuyler 1979). The musicians usually perform alone or in small groups, and continuous moving has always been essential to their art. The rwais share a common language with village music from the same region (*ahwash*), as well as basic elements of melodic and rhythmic organization. Because of their mobility, the rwais are not just professional musicians but "journalists, historians, and moralists," Schuyler suggests, or at least they were having such a function until the emergence of electronic media reaching into the villages, in particular the radio. Noting the decline of rwais expression following socio-economic transformations in 1979, Schuyler even predicted their disappearance. Although one can still occasionally spot a rais musician playing on the streets of Agadir or Tafraout today, most remaining professionals are indeed aging without younger ones to continue the tradition. Rwais music nevertheless still exists as a genre of commercial music produced locally and marketed



Lotiar and rebab instruments.

to a regional audience, as well as to members of the Tashlhit speaking diaspora in Morocco and abroad.

### ALI FAIQ AND RWAIS CONVENTIONS

Born in 1965, Ali Faiq grew up in Dcheira, a densely populated town situated 10 kilometers south of Agadir. He started his career as a professional singer and songwriter in the late 1980s with the band Dounia Amarg. Over the years, he became an important voice of the Berber-Ishlhin popular music scene in Morocco, releasing several albums with the band Amarg Fusion and later under his own name. Using Berber-Tashlhit language consistently in all of his songs, Ali Faiq's music can be best described as "fusion" (Simour 2016). It combines local elements, such as melodies, rhythms, and instruments, with diverse music styles (mainly reggae, funk, and jazz). Although not a professional rais himself, Ali Faiq has been exposed to this art since his childhood and started attending rwais music meetings in the early 2000s. Initially, the older rwais received him with a certain skepticism because of his activities as a pop musician, Ali Faiq recalls. He managed to gain their trust over the years, however, and started singing with them. He progressively became an active promoter of rwais expression and was involved in initiatives for the perpetuation and transmission of its oral repertory and history.

I was first introduced to Ali Faiq in June 2013 during the *Timitar* Music Festival in Agadir and visited him later in October at his family home in Ait Milk. He was organizing a rwais music convention for the first time (*assise des rwais* in French, *igiwr* in Tashlhit). Unlike concerts, rwais conventions are dedicated to the exchange of musical ideas, songs, and melodies between rwais peer practitioners—professionals as well as advanced amateurs. In the intimate atmosphere of Ali Faiq's home, a dozen of (exclusively male) musicians came together on that night and played for several hours, alternating between individually sung verses, collective choruses, and instrumental parts.

Later on, Ali Faiq showed me his collection of early and rare rwais recordings, including digital copies of 78 rpm records published in the 1930s by labels such as Baidaphone and Gramophone. As part of our listening session and interview, he played one track from the 1920s Pathé recordings, which he had recently retrieved from the French National Library (BNF) Gallica

website. We resumed our exchange in 2017, following the publication of his CD *Isbtin* (commemoration) with new interpretations of the Pathé songs. Apart from my interest and admiration for Ali Faiq's work as a musician in general, I came to realize that his research activities on historical recordings and archives were relevant to my own study in Morocco. Several questions emerged: how did Ali Faiq listen to and interpret the recordings from the digitized 1920s Pathé collection? What were the consequences for the status of these colonial sound archives? What were the consequences for rwaï history from his perspective? And, importantly, how could this research become a starting point for reconsidering the entangled relationships between early commercial recording, sound technology, colonial sound epistemology, and Berber vernacular modernity? Addressing these questions through joint listening sessions and conversations highlighted Ali Faiq's critical engagement with diverse—and at times conflicting—sound epistemologies. Before engaging further with these questions, it is necessary to consider the beginning of the music industry in Morocco and its relation to the colonial epistemology at the origin of the French Speech Archives.

#### EARLY COMMERCIAL RECORDINGS IN NORTH AFRICA

Commercial music recordings were introduced in North Africa at the very beginning of the twentieth century. As early as 1902, the French record company Pathé published “a special list of Egyptian cylinders” (Gronow 1981), and recordings for the British Gramophone Company soon followed. In 1912, Morocco became a French protectorate, in agreement with other European powers as part of the Treaty of Fez. In the same year, Pathé published a repertory of several hundred North-African recordings, and special catalogues were issued for Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Record companies were primarily targeting the European populations living in North Africa during the years of French, Spanish, British, and Italian occupation in the region (Ouijjani 2013). The music records market also included privileged “indigenous” customers, as the bilingual French/Arabic catalogues of Moroccan music attest.

Along with the emergence of a record-consuming audience, the recorded music market also created the new category of “recording artists.”

Whereas most of them were recruited for the foreign record companies by local agents amongst the locally successful musicians, the technical constraints of early recording devices also played a role in the process. The final choice of artists was made by western engineers sent on recording tours around the world, who had little understanding of the local music expressions they were encountering. In order to make commercially satisfying records, they thus favored the most “phonogenic” artists, that is the ones who had the best dispositions for producing successful recordings. For singers, this meant most of all having a voice strong enough to be captured by the low-sensitive diaphragms of the recording apparatus. Musicians also needed to quickly adapt to the specific technical, spatial, and temporal recording conditions, including shortening the songs to appropriate record durations, performing without an audience and without moving, and directing the other musicians in order to find the best configuration for group recordings in front of the phonograph horn.

In his book *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne (2003) extensively comments on the cultural origins of sound reproduction technologies, arguing that instead of being reproduced, sound was rather produced anew with these technologies. Deconstructing the relation between original and copy, he contends that early sound recording was fundamentally about producing a particular kind of listening experience, in line with the emergence of a bourgeois middle class form of listening. It was not until the 1960s that a similar middle class population slowly emerged in Morocco, following the country's independence and growing urbanization (Boufous and Khariss 2015). While only European residents and the Moroccan bourgeoisie could afford music records and players during the colonial era, people from lower classes came into contact with recorded music through spaces of socialization, such as weddings, celebrations, and cafés in particular (Ouijjani 2013). This led to a progressive transformation of the listeners' musical taste, privileging particular urban popular music genres, frequently modeled after successful Egyptian productions. Consequently, the practice and economy of local musicians was affected, both in terms of style and performing opportunities, as they were now competing with cheaper music playing machines.

The introduction of modern sound reproduction in Morocco led to a redistribution of authority and vulnerability amongst music makers, listeners, and other cultural actors, fostering creative new approaches in

some cases, while silencing certain practices in others. In most accounts on the early music industry in the Global South, however, sonic modernity is often reduced to a history of the impact of successive waves of western technological innovations on local practices, and the ways these practices had to adapt to the changes induced by technology in order to survive. As a result, we are left with the impression that sonic modernity has remained relatively unquestioned as a locally situated phenomenon in North Africa, and that it was de-facto assimilated together with the technology that embodied it. According to Emily Thompson (2013), the “modern sound” episteme emerged out of the “increasing technological mediation” of sound in the “machine age.” This included both the control of the behavior of sound in space through engineering techniques and the modelization of sound as an abstraction through scientific measuring techniques, exemplified later in the electric sound signal. These technological innovations were accompanied by socio-economic transformations of the ways people interacted with sound, which were increasingly defined by “acts of consumption.” Modern sound was thus importantly also a “commodity,” generating in turn new trends in the culture of listening. According to Thompson’s narrative, sonic modernity cannot be reduced to a set of modern sound technological innovations alone, and should be approached as a social phenomenon constantly under construction—a soundscape, ultimately dictating who gets to hear what at which point in history.

The means of technological sound production undoubtedly remained in the hands of European and American companies at least until the independence of the North African countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sonic modernity in the region, however, can be traced back to even before the advent of such technologies at the end of the nineteenth century. The progressive transition of Morocco to a market economy and its increasing exchanges with European countries led to social transformations. The population in cities increased and a new bourgeoisie emerged, benefiting from operations in international trade and the finance sector. While slow and relatively modest in scale, these changes certainly affected the overall soundscapes of cities and the ways people were listening to them. More generally, the perceived experience of social, spatial, and temporal change arguably led to the emergence of early forms of modern subjectivity in Morocco, albeit very unevenly, and despite the resistance to modernization on the part of the country’s successive rulers before French occupation.

Fahmy (2013) proposes possible directions for a sonic approach to early modern history in the Middle East, suggesting that information about sound, noise, and aurality could be retrieved from sharia cases, civil courts, and police records of the nineteenth century. Additional elements for the reconstruction of past soundscapes may be found in the material-architectural study of mosques and churches, as well as in written accounts of the transformations of urban space. While these ideas may certainly apply to Morocco as well, a detailed reconstruction of Morocco’s pre-protectorate soundscape lays beyond the scope of my study. What I want to suggest here is the possibility and necessity to look beyond western technology in order to consider how sound and listening became “modern” in North Africa. Sound technological reproduction and transmission is only one aspect of a larger constellation, including nascent capitalism, urban growth, industrialization, increasing mobility, the emergence of new social classes, evolving religious practices, and European colonization.

#### THE FRENCH SPEECH ARCHIVES AND THE COLONIAL BECOMING OF SOUND RECORDING

Initiated in 1911 by philologist Ferdinand Brunot, the French Speech Archives (Archives de la Parole) are exemplary of how modern sound technology led to the domestication of speech and music as scientific objects and commodities at the same time. Dedicated to “the recording, the preservation, and the study of all the manifestations of speech” (Cordereix 2014), the French Speech Archives emerged from the fields of Roman philology and experimental phonetics. In response to the “supremacy of written language,” Brunot believed that technologies of sound reproduction could provide an appropriate way to inscribe and transmit the specificity of the speech act, preserving thus its “absolute integrity.” Central to the objectification of speech was its materialization as a physical medium via recording equipment. This equipment was provided by Emile Pathé, owner of the commercial Pathé Records company and manufacturer of phonographs. Unlike the music recording industry, linguistic and phonetic sciences were very much interested in the scientific measurement of voices, which was then only possible through additional techniques of sound visualization



involving photographic processes. As Cordereix (2014) suggests, a dialectic emerged between the sonic inscription and the visual representation of speech, which was about “seeing what one hears and hearing what one sees.” Visual metaphors were indeed abundant in Brunot’s inaugural speech of the Archives in 1911, in which he compared them to a “microscope of speech,” allowing one to “observe the infinitely small.” Rather than actually listening to the recorded voices themselves, and in turn being affected by them, scientists like Brunot were more interested in a kind of biological observation of speech, as his constant references to natural sciences and evolutionist theses attest.

Between 1911 and 1920, the Speech Archives grew to contain several hundred sound recordings, organized into categories such as famous personalities, regional dialects, and foreign languages. During the 1920s and 1930s, new folk music recordings were added under the direction of Hubert Pernot, including 620 records of “Arab and Oriental music” donated by Pathé.<sup>4</sup> While the exact dates and recording circumstances of the discs remain unclear, the collection also contains three printed catalogues of the Moroccan recordings edited by Pathé in 1912, 1926, and 1930. The front cover is decorated with “arabesque” patterns and red watermarks, along with the Pathé logo representing a (French) rooster. No information about the artists is provided, but the first four pages of the bilingual (French-Arabic) catalogue contain seven photographs representing some of them.

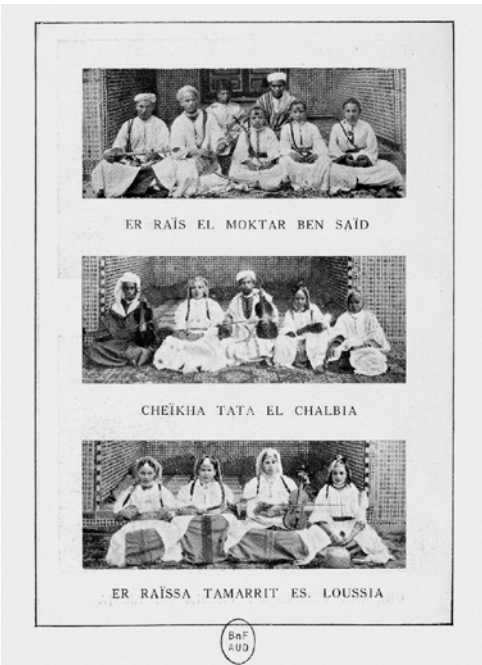
As the online notes suggest, Pathé’s donation of this collection to the French Speech Archives “perpetuated the historical links”

<sup>4</sup> The 1926 catalogue contains a list with the names of forty-two artists associated with seven Moroccan cities (Casablanca, Rabat, Fez, Marrakesh, Mogador [Essaouira], Tanger, and Tétouan), for a total of 494 tracks. Information retrieved from <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb42535309c>

between the company and the research institution. It also maintained an epistemological connection between industry and science, as well as practices of objectification and commodification of voices and identities based on a mix of technology and colonial ideology. In 1931, an employee of the French Speech Archives, Philippe Stern, supervised the *Music Anthology of the Colonial Exhibition* in Paris (Cordereix 2006). Together with his assistant Mady Humbert-Lavergne, Stern managed to record 346 documents, described by Cordereix as a (sonic) topography of the *Colonial Exhibition* and its pavilions. None of them, however, were directly recorded inside the human zoo-like exhibition, as planned initially, but in the studios of the phonetic institute at Sorbonne University. The “Asian” songs of the *Anthology* were performed by professional musicians “hosted” for the exhibition, while the “Northern and Western African” parts were performed by colonial soldiers of the French armies stationed nearby.

Pernot described the *Music Anthology of the Colonial Exhibition* as “a scientific work” and at the same time as “an extensive work of French propaganda, in its best sense” (Cordereix 2006). With the *Anthology*, the racist ideology underlying the *Colonial Exhibition* project was implemented at the core of the scientific recording methodology supported by the French Speech Archives. In this manner, sound, materialized as recording, became an instrument of colonial propaganda, part of a general movement of objectification, aestheticization, and spectacularization of the colonized “Other.” In the *Colonial Exhibition*, the classificatory logic of the Pathé catalogues was transposed into an architectural configuration of pavilions representing the countries colonized by France. The various forms of individual and collective musical expression became naturalized as “indigenous cultures” through the recordings. Geographical locations in the catalogues now found their counterparts in the dehumanized bodies presented in the exhibition. Despite the fact that the Pathé record company and the French Speech Archives were initially distinct projects, the study of their “historical links” tends to demonstrate how sound technology became central to the conceptualization of *modern sound* as an equally commercial *and* scientific product. While sound first became “modern” because it was “perceived to demonstrate man’s technical mastery over his physical environment” (Thompson 2013), sound also became an instrument of European colonial mastery over its cultural Other during the first third of the twentieth century.

Top: Cover of the 1926 Pathé Catalogue of Moroccan Records.  
Bottom: Page 3 of the same catalogue.



## LISTENING TO DIGITIZED COLONIAL SOUND ARCHIVES TODAY

The entire recording collection of the French Speech Archives was later transferred to the newly created French National Sound Library (Phonothèque Nationale) in 1938. While stored and physically preserved in good conditions, their fragility made them accessible only by special permission until their digitization and online publication on the Gallica website in 2013. Such limited accessibility was often the result of colonial politics applied to practices of collecting and archiving. As Hoffmann (2015) suggests, the existence of a large amount of early phonographic records made in Africa, and kept in European sound archives, was rarely known to African researchers and their communities of origin. With the newly accessible digital archives, the nature of the information retrievable online remains conditioned by the preceding material “disaggregation” of the physical recording medium into digital audio files and a series of images (record, cylinder, labels). The digital fragmentation of the sounding object is just one of the “figuring effects” of the archive over time, Hoffmann argues. She further describes these effects as

the result of the imbrication of practices and politics of preservation and omission, logics of inclusion and exclusion, of labeling and registration, which speak of the technologies and interests at play, of configurations of power, societal and/or scientific aims of preservation, of retaining, storing, creating knowledge and freezing, of rules of evidence, all of which constitute particular records (and not others).

From a scientific perspective, listening to digital sound archives entails tracing back the successive steps that led to their constitution. Importantly, digital archives also do not allow one to listen to the past directly, but to acoustic archives and historical sound files. Hoffmann further identifies possible approaches to such listening, to which I refer here in an attempt to describe Ali Faiq's own way of engaging with the digital recordings of the Pathé collection.

## ALI FAIQ'S CLOSE LISTENING TO THE PATHÉ RECORDINGS

The research undertaken by Ali Faiq on the Pathé Moroccan recordings pertains to a handful of rwais musicians.<sup>5</sup> His engagement with the recordings emerged out of his general interest to discover “hidden” or lesser-known rwais songs, and to share them with Tashlhit speaking listeners. I am always searching, he explains, because preserving heritage involves looking for hidden parts of it. If I perform a very well-known song to an audience, Ali Faiq adds, I’m not contributing anything new, but if I sing something unknown, then there is added value to my performance. Collecting “hidden heritage” by digging into old recordings and gathering songs directly from older rwais thus became part of Ali Faiq’s practice in cultural preservation. When the rwais recordings of the Pathé collection were made accessible online, he soon recognized in them a “treasure.”

Between February 2018 and April 2019, Ali Faiq and I sat together on several occasions in front of the Gallica website on his computer, as I was curious to learn more about his way of listening to the Pathé recordings, and about how he made sense of them. Some of these sessions were video documented, with one short excerpt featuring in my film *Salam Godzilla* (see Chapter III). This setting provided a more formal context from which he could be heard and seen talking to me about these recordings, and indirectly to a larger, presumed western, audience. Next to a button for the playback of the audio file (without download function), each page on the Gallica website contains a scanned image of the original record label and notes about

5 The Pathé collection contains recordings by the following rwais musicians: rais Abdallah Ennair, rais Boudjemâa, rais Mohamed Soussi, and raissa Abouche Tamassit.



Label of a Pathé record from the French Speech Archives, Paris, 1920s.

the recording.<sup>6</sup> In the beginning of the interview, Ali Faiq declares that the people at the French National Library really liked the *Iskitin* CD that resulted from his project. He mentions that the CD contains a written reference to the library and that permission was requested (and granted) beforehand for using five of the songs in the publication. He argues that his project played a direct role in the local promotion of the French institution, making listeners in the region aware of its existence, together with the Pathé recordings.

Regarding the notes on the recordings in the collection, Ali Faiq observes that most song titles and artist names are spelled incorrectly in their Roman notation. For this reason, he decided to rename some of the songs in a way that seemed more appropriate when presenting them to a Tashlhit speaking audience. The categorization of the songs as “foreign traditional music” does not trigger any comment by Ali Faiq. When it comes to the language of the songs, however, their improper categorization as “Arabic” instead of Tashlhit appears highly problematic to him. The people in charge of the archive have generally failed to identify the spoken dialects that were recorded, he adds. His remarks did not surprise me, given the long history of struggle of Amazigh minorities for recognition of their respective dialects as official languages in Morocco. This did not change until the dialects were introduced into the constitution in 2011. Despite uncertainties regarding the precise date of some of the recordings in the Pathé collection, others are clearly dated to 1927, Ali Faiq observes. He also notes that the 80 rpm recording technique was of a “previous generation” compared to the 78 rpm recording technique, which was standardized shortly after.

6 The notes contain the following information: song title; publisher; year of initial publication/recording; category; document type; language; format; description; property rights; date of online publication; and various reference numbers.

This information allows him to claim that the Pathé recordings preceded by a few years those published by the Gramophone company in 1929—so far considered to be the oldest rwais music recordings.

According to Hoffmann (2015), archival “metadata,” such as the information contained on the Gallica website, reveal much about the practices at play in the creation of the archive. Yet, they often have little to say on the content of the recordings. For colonial and imperial archives, metadata often relate to “premediated ideas of natives,” of which the recordings provide “musical examples.” In the case of the Pathé rwais recordings, the idea of “natives” conveyed in the metadata is that of a “foreign,” “Arab,” and “traditional” culture. These terms largely correspond with known stereotypes about “Arab culture,” such as “pre-modern,” “exotic,” “fanatic,” and “Other,” as described by Said in his examination of western “orientalist” representations (Said 1978). Even though Ali Faiq did not comment on these stereotypes, he made a point showing that much of the information provided in the Archives’ metadata is incorrect.

Ali Faiq approached the French Speech Archives as a rwais music expert and practitioner, an amateur historian, and a self-taught specialist in early sound recording technology and archival techniques. Through his close listening to the Pathé rwais recordings, he managed to re-situate the Tashlhit recordings as part of the specific genre of rwais oral expression in southwestern Morocco. While the tracks are identified as “music” in the online notes, he objected that rwais expression is much more than just music, encompassing a whole set of professional practices, such as poetry, storytelling, news reporting, messaging, moral advising, dance, a specific way of dressing, and more. With his comment, Ali Faiq reacted to the “dislodgement” effect of archival recording—that is the extraction of a sung or spoken fragment from “a body of genre-specific texts and from referential frames.” Dislodgement itself is the result of specific practices of “extractive listening,” which “foregoes registration,” leading to the “erasure of particular speaking positions” (Hoffmann 2015). Ali Faiq’s close listening was driven by the necessity to counter this erasure and by his desire to reconstruct the recorded voices as historical subjects. He retrieved information from the recordings by analyzing them in terms of accent, melodic and poetic style, narrative content, and the mentioning of specific places and individual names. By further cross-checking these data with other musicological sources, he managed to reassemble them into biographical fragments.

One of the archived voices caught Ali Faiq’s attention in particular: Abouche Tamassit, the female raissa mentioned in my introduction. These are the only known recordings of her, he notes in the interview, and few people were aware of her existence previously. This is because no commercial recordings were made of her and also because she didn’t travel much, unlike the male rwais. Abouche Tamassit was only allowed to perform in the private houses of powerful local personalities, such as the pasha Thami El Glaoui (1879-1956), an ally of the French Protectorate in the Atlas region. Her voice is “magical,” Ali Faiq declares, “it makes me travel to the Massa region when I hear it, also with her accent.” Ali Faiq insists on her talent as a musician, noting that she was also a very good lotar player and that she had a particular way of mixing melodic modes. Her poetic verses were excellent too, he continues, and she was well aware of the modernity of her time, alluding to automobiles and airplanes in one of the songs. In one song she laments about her own condition, as in the following verses: “O dove, can I fly away with you? I’d like to go with you, but I’m chained.” The fact that she was recorded by Pathé in Marrakesh also shows that she had reached a respectable professional status, Ali Faiq remarks, after starting her career in Tiznit. So far, only male artists were remembered as part of the early rwais history. Abouche Tamassit is an important example of someone who dared to affirm herself as an artist within a conservative and patriarchal society, where women were forbidden to sing in the presence of men. Her voice matters even more today, Ali Faiq concludes, as a model for female singers who are still often perceived as “socially deviant,” but also for all the people who, like him, have chosen to be an artist in a society “that doesn’t take art seriously as a profession.”

Ali Faiq clearly appears affected by his findings. His critical engagement with colonial archives shines a new light on existing representations of rwais musicians. If sonic pluralism is primarily concerned with countering the oppressive effects of particular epistemologies, it is also very much about re-negotiating the terms of the relationship between coloniality and knowledge itself. Western scientific knowledge and locally situated knowledges were never granted an equal status, and the authority of the former is deeply entangled with the coloniality of power. In order to gain knowledge from the archive for himself and his community, Ali Faiq first had to engage with colonial sound epistemology and its logics of cultural othering. Sonic pluralism, therefore, very much appears as a process of mediation and negotiation

between competing epistemologies and representations. As it entails a form of “border thinking” (Mignolo 2011), sonic pluralism allows shifting the borders of knowledge and authority. The concept of knowledge itself is transformed in the process, re-embodied from a particular standpoint, and re-purposed for different needs.

Overall, the recordings help to better picture “the true situation of the rwais at the time,” Ali Faiq argues, identifying in the songs signs of the diversity of their practices and influences—melodic as well as linguistic, also attesting to their mobility. The rwais were “open artists,” he remarks, who traveled beyond tribal borders in order to share their knowledge with other tribes and communities. The songs from the French Speech Archives also show that there were masterful rwais who have not been commercially recorded. Their music had all the attributes of “serious music” (*musique savante*) of their time with its own rules and aesthetics, Ali Faiq also claims. Although his research was limited to a couple of songs preceding those shellac discs formerly known as “the first rwais recordings,” he didn’t claim that he had found “older oldest” rwais recordings. Instead, he made a point to show that the recordings were incorrectly described in the Archives’ metadata, thus reclaiming them from the “colonial noise map” (Denning 2015) for his own community. By cross-interpreting some of the information retrieved via close listening to the recordings with other sources, Ali Faiq also managed to demonstrate that a whole field of rwais expression existed outside of the recordings, and *before* recording especially.

The scarcity of serious research on rwais music helps to better situate Ali Faiq’s project. He rightly argues that the history of rwais expression “has not been written yet.” There is no objectivity, he says; everyone here sees rwais history in their own way. There are no scientific repertoires of rwais songs and recordings, no bibliography on rwais music, no proper biographies of the rwais themselves. While a few ethnomusicological studies on rwais music exist, they are usually compiled by foreign scholars (e.g. Chottin 1930; Schuyler 1979), and thus hard to access for local musicians, he regrets. As a consequence, there is limited scientific understanding of rwais music in terms of styles, genres, and schools, he adds, equally acknowledging the importance of critical expertise for evaluating musical productions and helping practitioners to solve problems encountered during the creation of new works. Such knowledge is indispensable to the creative evolution of music and for its transmission, he continues, which may explain why jazz







or Latin American music, for example, are taught worldwide in conservatories, while Berber music is not. Even though Ali Faiq only rarely expressed his dissatisfaction with Moroccan state policies on culture and education, such critiques were often implicit in his comments. He repeatedly called for better funding for research and community-based rwais initiatives.

#### ALI FAIQ'S CD *ISKITIN*

Additional questions emerge regarding Ali Faiq's efforts to disseminate the rwais songs from the French Speech Archives among his community and beyond. So far, his initiatives have taken two different forms: a CD publication in 2016, and the transmission of the songs as part of rwais musician gatherings. These two forms relate to distinct contexts: commercial music production in one case, and community work in the other. Ali Faiq found himself in the ambivalent position of a "native ethnographer" (Goodman 2005), raising questions about the ways the songs were brought into relation with particular ideological agendas.

Published as a self-release by Ali Faiq in 2016, the CD *Iskitin* (commemoration) contains five songs retrieved from the Pathé collection and one additional song based on a previously undocumented rwais melody. The songs have been re-arranged into new "fusion" versions, combining western instruments (electric bass and guitar, drums, and keyboards), together with rwais instruments (lotar and rebab). Next to Ali Faiq on vocals, the band includes three former members of Amarg Fusion and three rwais musicians. The ensemble was named Amarg Experience with the intention of bringing a younger audience into contact with rwais expression, according to Ali Faiq. While the band kept the original melodies and lyrics for the new versions, they play them at a slower tempo than on the Pathé recordings, and the rhythmical accompaniment is frequently in "half time." The melodies are enriched with modern jazz harmonies and counterpointed by bass lines in West African pop style. The lotar and rebab instruments mostly follow the voice in the traditional way, with melodic embellishments by the rebab. Most songs have the character of groovy ballads, often punctuated by uneven time signatures and bar sequences. Added reverberation and paddy synth sounds produce an overall spacious impression. Possibly reminiscent of the 1980s

Cover and back cover of the CD *Iskittin* by Ali Faiq and Amarg Experience, 2016.



Anglo-American and West African world music sound, the CD greatly differs in sound and style from the unsophisticated and direct tone of the recorded versions from the 1920s and 30s. It offers modernized versions of these songs, produced in order to reach a young, urbanized audience of regional and diasporic Tashlhit speakers, and potentially also a wider audience on the world stage. Particularly striking in this regard is the first track, which starts with a fifteen second excerpt of an Abouche Tamassit Pathé recording, before fading into the band's reinterpretation of the same song. On the one hand, this short fragment arguably reduces the original song to a mere "sign of the past." On the other, it conveys a sense of Abouche Tamassit's voice and style, potentially initiating future conversations about her life and work, and women's place in the history of rwais expression.

Overall, the musical content of the CD is coherent with the fusion/world music style characterizing Ali Faiq's previous albums. The packaging, however, appears more ambiguous. The song titles and authors' names are provided in Tashlhit language on the back cover in Roman transliteration. The remaining texts are in French, including the name of the original editor (Pathé) and dates, as well as contact information and links to social media. The first five songs are visually grouped together by a frame indicating their provenance from the French National Library. The front cover shows a black and white drawing of unidentified musicians in traditional costume, along with the logo of the Moroccan Ministry of Culture (in Arabic, French, and Tifinagh). The cover evokes the sepia tones of early photographs. This appearance somehow contrasts with the modern sounding music recordings, possibly reducing its visual appeal for a younger audience. The sparse information in French targets educated listeners more attuned to questions about history and heritage. The dates highlight an *old* tradition, a sign of an *authentic* culture to be commemorated.

The logo of the Ministry of Culture further complicates the CD's subtext. In addition to the state's financial contribution, the logo also acknowledges the state's symbolic recognition of Amazigh traditions. With its title in Roman, Tifinagh, and Arabic scripts especially, the CD cover conveys the state's current ideology of the inclusion of minorities as part of its multi-cultural identity policy. This ideology remains ambiguous, however, because these very minorities continue to be denied full cultural recognition and political rights (Boum 2007). The juxtaposition of diverse, and at times contradictory, cultural references on the CD cover mirrors Ali Faiq's difficult



position in a context of competing cultural-political agendas. Each of these ideologies—state multiculturalism, Berber-Amazigh activism, and global music consumerism—dictate their own way of dealing with culture, alterity, tradition, and modernity. While the musical content generally fits the requirements of the world music market, the packaging echoes the struggle between state and Amazigh ideological discourses. The absence of detailed liner notes arguably adds confusion and ambiguity to Ali Faiq's project and intention. Without information about the songs, lyrics, their historical significance, the biographies of their *rwaï*s authors, and more generally about Ali Faiq's research in the French Speech Archives, the CD does not quite fulfill its educative ambitions.

### CIRCULATION OF THE PATHÉ SONGS AT RWAÏS CONVENTIONS

Ali Faiq also decided to re-introduce the Pathé songs in his community through oral transmission at *rwaï*s music conventions (*Igiwr*). These assemblies are concerned with the cultivation and perpetuation of cultural memory. In my analysis, I draw on Kansteiner's (2002) definition of "cultural memory" as a body comprising reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. *Rwaï*s conventions highlight the ambiguous relationship between "cultural memory" and "history" and question the divide between "academic and non-academic representations of the past."

Ali Faiq began taking part in *rwaï*s conventions around 2000, hosting some of them at his family home in Ait Milk since 2013. The main purpose of these conventions is to come together and practice *rwaï*s music. They take place spontaneously and the number of musicians varies according to their availability. The principle is simple, Ali Faiq comments: we discuss, we share a meal together, we make a playlist, and we play. It's not a jam session, but a practice session, he adds. I had the chance to attend two *rwaï*s conventions at Ali Faiq's house in Ait Milk in 2013 and 2019, plus another one in Bigra in 2018. Each time, the participants (all male) arrived in the early evening, chatted together for a bit, then played in a circle for several hours. About ten musicians were present each time, including *lotar*, *rebab*, and *naqus* (metal percussion) players, sometimes switching between instruments. Ali Faiq

performed as a vocalist, alternating with other singers, with all the musicians singing during choruses. The session always started with a long instrumental prelude (*Astara*, Schuyler 1979), as is necessary for the tuning of the string instruments. The performance evolved into other parts characteristic for *rwaï*s music, alternating between sung poetry (*Amarg*); rhythmical melodic sections in various time signatures and tempi (*Tebil*, *Tamssust*, *Ladrub*, *Qtaa*, and *Ti n-Ihalqt*); occasional verbal improvisations (*Mashkharra*); and sometimes concluding with a prayer invoking Allah's benediction (*Fatha*). Several rounds of mint tea were served, as well as a *tagine*, a slow-cooked meal prepared with meat and vegetables in a large clay pot. The atmosphere at these conventions was joyful and convivial, and I always felt very much welcome as a guest of Ali Faiq.

The term "Igiwr" (literally "sitting together") is not mentioned in the glossary provided by Schuyler as part of his extensive study of *rwaï*s music practices. However, the *rwaï*s conventions as I have experienced them come close to what Schuyler (1979) describes as "practice sessions" in comparison to various forms of public performances:

The *rwaï*s practice their music, they don't rehearse for performance. Musicians often get together for informal performances in each other's home, or, particularly, in the inns or residential cafés that serve itinerant musicians in the big cities. These sessions provide entertainment and practice for all the participants. This gives older performers the chance to show off their knowledge of the more obscure parts of the repertory and younger performers the chance to expand their repertory. At the same time, the *rwaï*s also use these occasions to try out new compositions before an audience of their peers. Finally, the café sessions serve as a talent market as well: groups for the *hlaqas* are formed in cafés, and local group leaders often dip into the reservoir of musicians to pull out an extra sideman at the last minute for a wedding or restaurant performance. Café performances do not, however, constitute advance preparation or rehearsal for a specific performance. Indeed, the pieces performed during practice sessions are often precisely those that would not be performed in a public situation: new, unfinished pieces; old and difficult pieces; and current, popular songs too closely identified with one performer to be played by another.

The main focus of rwais conventions today appears similar to the sessions described by Schuyler, namely music practice and the sharing of lesser-known melodies. The context in which the sessions take place has nevertheless changed radically, moving away from a situation where it was still possible to sustain one's own life as a professional rwais musician, to the present situation where this is hardly the case anymore. I could easily verify this during the meetings I attended, where only a few musicians were introduced to me as professional rwais, usually in their fifties or older, while the majority of the participants were experienced amateur musicians. Largely in their forties and fifties, they were part of the working class and middle class. There was only one younger musician present, a teacher and the son of one of the older musicians. The process of oral transmission of rwais expression between the generations is extinct, Ali Faiq explains, and young musicians don't aspire to become professional rwais anymore. For this reason, young musicians are regularly invited to join the conventions on the condition that they use rwais instruments and perform the old rwais songs. Although rwais conventions have existed for a long time, nowadays they mirror the participants' efforts to preserve common heritage. These events are part of a current return to the sources, a "revival" of the rwais tradition, Ali Faiq comments.

Rwais conventions, as they are practiced today, are part of a larger movement concerned with the valorization of cultural memory, in a context where "identity is problematized" (Kansteiner 2002). Several causes are at the origin of the current crisis of Berber-Ishlhin identity: the state's enduring denial of political and economic rights to minorities (Boum 2007); the partial failure of previous attempts to construct stable alternative postcolonial identities as part of the cultural revivals of the 1970s and 80s (Simour 2016); and the fragmenting and destabilizing effects of globalization on identity, further amplified by the dematerializing effects of digital media networks (Goodman 2005). Ali Faiq's initial engagement with rwais expression developed as part of his activities as a pop singer in the band Amarg Fusion, primarily via listening to commercial rwais recordings, followed by the inclusion of a few songs in the band's repertoire. This encounter was only "superficial," he explains, until he started attending rwais meetings and got to know their art by way of direct "impregnation," rather than through records. This was doubtlessly a formative experience for Ali Faiq, granting him access to a new field of knowledge and practice,

and possibly also evoking a new sense of belonging and identity. His research project on the Pathé recordings emerged from this experience, entrusting him with a new role as a *mediator* between the rwais community and their cultural memory.

When representations of the past are stored in archives, libraries, and museums, cultural memories first occur in a mode of "potentiality" (Kansteiner 2002). They later become "actual" memories when these representations are adopted and given new meaning in different social and historical contexts. Interestingly, Ali Faiq chose not to playback the Pathé recordings during the meetings, and instead performed some of the songs to the rwais, as he was curious about their reaction. The rwais were intrigued by the songs, he recalls, asking for their provenance and mentioning other verses and melodies associated with them. The songs were progressively adopted as part of the repertoire performed in rwais conventions, as I personally witnessed in 2018 and 2019. In this sense, Ali Faiq's project provides a successful example of cultural re-appropriation of recordings from colonial archives.

If rwais conventions nowadays can be defined predominantly as a celebration of cultural memory, they still foster creative music practices. These include verbal improvisation (*Mashkharra*), of which I witnessed an impressive example during a convention in Bigra in 2018. In a sequence lasting more than ten minutes, one raï improvised a series of fast poetic verses, successively addressing several of the musicians and guests, including myself, often in a humorous, biting tone. In another instance, I attended the performance of a new song composed by Ali Faiq based on a 1920s melody by l'Hajj Belaid and a written text by a poet from the region, who was described to me as the "Baudelaire of the Souss." The third example is related to the oral transmission of a melody sung by an old rwais that Ali Faiq heard during a convention, which was not previously documented on a recording. Ali Faiq adapted it into a new song for his *Iskittin* CD, preserving the melody on a published medium. My point with these examples is to demonstrate that creation in contemporary rwais expression is not only synonymous with composition in the sense of original songwriting, but also pertains to the recombination of melodies and verses from various Ishlhin authors, source media, and epochs.

Ali Faiq's choice to reintroduce the songs through direct transmission at rwais conventions could possibly be regarded as an example of "performing natural memory," in other words as a simulation of direct oral transmission,

masking at the same time the colonial origins of these “oral texts” in the French Speech Archives (see Goodman 2005). Ali Faiq's intention was not to “restore the past” in the name of an idealized modern Berber-Ishlhin culture and identity; his approach instead draws on a self-invented research methodology. By confronting older rwais musicians with the Pathé songs, he was able to observe their reactions and elicit new melodies from their responses. His method was successful because it demonstrated that neither the historical quality nor the archival origin of the songs interested the rwais at first. What mattered was the possibility of relating the Pathé songs with other elements of their “repertory of ideas” (Schuyler 1979). It was only at a later stage that Ali Faiq shared information about the songs and his research inside the archive during these meetings, and thereafter in public presentations. Through his approach, he arguably managed to avoid fetishizing the recordings themselves as traces of an imagined “authentic” rwais past. As Kansteiner (2002) remarks, images of the past (and sounds, too in this case) can easily be instrumentalized in the name of ideological propaganda as “signposts, directing people who remember to preferred meanings by the fastest route.”

#### RWAIS EXPRESSION AND THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Ali Faiq's engagement with the Pathé colonial archive can be explained in part by the lack of serious musicological work on rwais expression and by his dissatisfaction about the ways rwais history is generally understood in his community. As he remarked on several occasions during our exchanges, it is the first generation of *recording* artists who continue to be viewed as the pioneers and founders of rwais expression today. This “first” generation includes the famous El-Hajj Belaid who recorded for Baidaphone in 1929, soon followed by Sasbo, Rzuq, Bubakr Azaqri, and Bubakr Anshad. Schuyler (1979) made a similar observation in his own study, noting that the media had given the rwais “a new history and hierarchy:”

Traditionally, the rwais have been ranked by their colleagues and their audience on the basis of their musical, poetic and choreographic ability on the one hand, and on their age, experience and moral

rectitude on the other hand. Initially, the early recordings changed neither the relative ranking of the rwais, nor the nature of the hierarchy. The prestige of some musicians was enhanced, but this only reaffirmed, and slightly exaggerated, their existing status. With the passing of years, however, the reputation of the early recording has continued to grow. Professional genealogies, like the social and biological genealogies of mountain tribes, have always been shallow, rarely reaching beyond three or four generations. Hajj Belaid would undoubtedly be remembered today even if he had not been the first to record. Yet, coincidentally or not, the rwais cannot recall any notable musician before Belaid's time. [...] The existence of recordings has given Belaid and others a permanent claim on certain turns of melodic and poetic phrase. Thus, though the rwais continue to recycle musical material, no modern rais can hope to approach his predecessors' reputation for originality and inspiration.

As Schuyler suggests, commercial recording has progressively become the dominant reference for narrating the history of rwais expression, if not the *only* reference in absence of proper ethnomusicological research. As products of the French colonial era, the Pathé recordings were part of “the polyphony of subaltern musical cultures” (Denning 2015) recorded and circulated by producers and engineers who knew little about them, and who “often regarded them as *noise*” (Schuyler 1979). Whereas the rwais sometimes gained prestige and economical retribution from their interactions with commercial recording, their position remained subaltern as the music market was entirely controlled by western companies until independence. These unequal terms of interaction continued after independence in 1956 through SMEDIP (Société marocaine d'édition et distribution de phonographes) and its subsidiary label Koutoubiaphone, who established a virtual monopoly over the top performers of the Souss region (Schuyler 1979). Though the rwais initially couldn't yet directly engage with the tools of modern technological sound reproduction, the situation changed with the introduction of cassette recordings in the 1970s. Pirate cassette stores became big in 1976, Schuyler observes, along with new practices of creating tailor-made playlists on cassettes for the customers. The rwais started making tapes of their own performances and selling them, granting themselves a

greater voice in the production and distribution of their music, though with little financial return. These experiments helped to cast off the temporal and conceptual limitations of the commercial 45 rpm format, giving the rwais a certain agency in technological sound production. Young rwais also found a new tool for studying the repertory of cassettes, leading to a transformation of former learning modes based on direct transmission.

While this was in principle a continuation of the rwais practice of collecting ideas and indeed gave them access to new, foreign music sources, it also turned rwais music increasingly into a repertory of fixed songs.

With the electrification of popular music in 1970s Morocco, new forms of creative engagement with sound technology appeared. Along with the Moroccan “New Song” movement, groups like Ousmane and Izanzaren created music based on western instruments, electronic amplification, and effects, while borrowing rhythms, melodies, and structures from rwais music (Lefebure 1986). Many of the bands' musicians had a formal music education and others came from universities. They wrote new songs in Tashlhit and other Berber dialects in an attempt to create a modern “cultural affirmation of a pan-Berber cultural identity. With their “liberationist ideas,” these bands arguably came close to what could be called *Berber futurism*, as some of the record covers perhaps illustrate. The new Berber song movement soon lost some of its ideological fervor, however. Confronted by brutal state repression in the 1980s under Hassan II's rule, the movement later evolved into more commercial fusion music, from where Ali Faiq emerged as a professional singer in the 1990s.



Cover of the record *Takandout* by Ousmane, 1976.

## RWAIS SOUND AND TECHNOLOGICAL AWARENESS

The brief overview of the history of commercial rwais recordings tends to demonstrate that rwais musicians had no or little control over the means of sound technological reproduction. According to this narrative, technology is mostly described in terms of “effects” and “affects,” in short, as an external force imposed by Europeans on local musicians and cultural agents. The successive generations of electronic media have progressively eroded the social function of rwais expression, the story goes. Rwais history has become increasingly dependent on the commercial music market, ultimately reducing rwais expression to a sub-genre of the contemporary world music industry. When western narratives of sonic modernity limit themselves to a story of technological progress and industrialization where native populations have no agency, then they tend to perpetuate a colonial understanding of technology. As Louis Chude-Sokei (2016) argues, the “racism of technology” is grounded in the ideological colonial assumption that “race (primitive past) cannot be conciliated with technology (modern future).” This is best exemplified today by the so-called “digital divide,” a metaphor that maintains an underlying assumption that “people of color cannot keep pace with our high-tech society.” This does not need to be so, Chude-Sokei argues. “Sound” is the place where race became a crucial element in the engagement with technology, he continues, and Black music provides the signs of technological production in which Black people function with some degree of primacy. By focusing on music as a “space of sound production,” it becomes possible to reorient our listening towards practices that attest to a conscious engagement with “man-machine relationships.”

In the last part of this chapter, I further engage with rwais (musical and poetic) “sound” as a site of conscious engagement with technology, human-machines relationships, as well as other transformations brought by western modernity. Because of their mobility, the rwais were witnessing changes ongoing at all levels of Moroccan society in the early twentieth century—in the villages as well as in the cities. Thanks to their scholarly and religious education, they were able to reflect on such transformations and offer moral guidance to their listeners through their songs. The songs recorded by El-Hajj Belaid (1873-1945) provide a good overview of the situation in the 1920s and 1930s. Belaid's broad thematic content includes

evocations of his suffering with poetry, wandering, and traveling; courtly love and the celebration of feminine beauty; as well as social criticism (Ameskane 2012). Hajj Belaid played an “undeniable role as an historian of everyday life,” Ameskane notes, “in recording events that shook the region.” He also left anthology pieces about his travels, describing his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1910 and his visit to King Mohammed V.

Several of Belaid’s songs address technological innovations introduced by the colonizers, as in “Chifour outoumoubil” (automobile). Peyron (2010) also observed that many verses alluding to symbols of modernity can be identified in Berber poetry of the time, referring to petrol, the gas-cylinder, the steamship, the aeroplane, the bus, the car, and more. Belaid’s song “L’makina” is especially striking with its title referring to “the machine,” and more specifically here to the phonograph:

I have to stop making verses, because someone had the good idea to invent the phonograph that can precisely recall speech without modifications.

These benefactors, we need to talk about them our forefathers only spoke about horse riders and their feats.

We talk about cars, tea, and buildings and about the news from Fes, Marrakesh, and even Goulmime.<sup>7</sup>

In this song, Belaid makes clear references to the symbols of modernity described by Peyron: cars, buildings, and tea (which was introduced



Cover of the record *Live at Olympia* by Ousmane, 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Excerpt of *L’makina*, El-Hajj Belaid, circa 1937. French translation by Ali Faiq, English translation by the author.

to Morocco in the nineteenth century). He also marks his difference vis-à-vis previous generations of rwais who were more concerned with pastoral and heroic themes, although he himself notoriously traveled across the mountains on a mule in order to “collect melodies” sung by villagers, often women (Schuyler 1979). Belaid’s description of the phonograph as a faithful speech recording machine is not without irony; he realizes that it might well take his own job away from him. What’s more, his verses suggest that the machine may have additional powers, opening up a whole field of ontological questions regarding the status of sound, voice, the body, as well as humans and machines themselves. Is the newly reproduced voice a new subject or is it just an object of consumption? If the machine can potentially replace a human, is it a new being? A new body? Does it conversely turn the human into a machine-like creature? If these questions do not find a direct answer in Belaid’s song, they do however surface in it through the expression of the poet’s trouble caused by the machine. “L’makina” provides thus an early example of intellectual engagement with man-machine relationships in Morocco, which curiously resonates with current anxieties triggered by ubiquitous computation, artificial intelligence, and automatization.

In order to widen my analysis of rwais “sound” as a site of knowledge production and technological engagement, I need to turn to yet other aspects of rwais sound and transmission practices. One of these aspects is the continuous mobility of rwais musicians, which “has always been essential to their art” (Schuyler 1979), because of the economic necessity to find paying audiences beyond their home region, and as a way to *collect* new materials for their songs. As a result, their repertory uses melodic ideas from “external sources,” such as Moroccan Andalusian music, Arab folk music, and western music. In the following lines, Schuyler describes the rwais repertory as a processual aggregation of ideas:

We have seen that the rwais repertory is not a collection of fixed pieces, but rather a collection of ideas. Elements are combined into new ones, but the underlying elements of the music-rhythm, mode and structure remain constant. The music, thus, qualifies to what Constantin Brăiloiu terms “création collective” (1973: 142). The basic elements of the repertory, as well as many complete melodies, belong equally to all rwais, and, indeed, to all Ishlhin, since there is constant interchange between the village and professional

repertoires. The individual musicians may stand out for their ability to recombine old patterns in new ways, or, more rarely, for their creation of new patterns. But the resulting compositions are, on the one hand, the summation of the efforts of the composer's predecessors, and, on the other hand, a contribution to the efforts of his successors.

The plurality that characterizes the particular modernity of *rwais* sound now appears more clearly. Plurality is expressed in the multiplicity of sources—local, external, and recorded—that inform the *content* of *rwais* sound, which are collected by traveling and later aggregated into the common “repertory of ideas.” The combinatory principle that characterizes this repertory also gives a plural status to songs in *rwais* expression. Instead of being fixed narratives, songs allow for multiple combinations of ideas, and therefore interpretations of specific themes. The constant interchanges between *rwais* musicians themselves and the collective dimension of their repertoire also suggest a plural understanding of authorship, which relativizes the importance of individual expression and intellectual ownership. The relationship between *rwais* expression and memory does not correspond with a single historical memory category, as it combines various forms of “natural memory” (direct transmission), “modern cultural memory” (memory as institution and knowledge system), and “post-modern cultural memory” (memory constituted primarily through media consumption) (Kantseiner 2002). *Rwais* expression and its repertory therefore come close to a *living archive*, that is an embodied, relational, and collectively distributed mode of knowledge production and transmission.

The effects of recorded media on oral *rwais* expression should not be minimized, however, with their tendency to enhance the prestige of individual musicians, and to turn songs into fixed forms and narratives. If tensions existed between the oral and technologically mediated forms of *rwais* expression, the *rwais* were also well aware of them and reflected them in their art. These tensions were part of wider transformations in Moroccan society, which the *rwais* were witnessing through their constant traveling and social interactions. Because of their particular role in society, the *rwais* were not just professional musicians, but “journalists, historians and moralists,” Schuyler suggests (1979). He further describes their function as “mediators” (Schuyler 1979b), between rural and urban populations,

between orthodox and syncretic practices of Islam, between tribalism and individualism, and more generally between “opposing tendencies” within society. Early modernity brought new opportunities, such as traveling and material consumption for the privileged ones, along with economical anxieties, family separation, exploitative labour, colonial oppression, and uncertainties regarding people's lives in general. The tensions caused by modern technology in *rwais* oral expression were thus just one aspect of the “opposing tendencies” that characterized early modernity in Morocco. The *rwais*' education and poetic skills allowed them to reflect these tensions in their songs, providing intellectual and moral guidance to their audiences. Such practices mirror a form of plural epistemological thinking and sounding. The *rwais*' capacity to reflect on opposing tendencies and to mediate between competing knowledges and ideologies is what granted them agency in Moroccan society, as well as the population's respect.

#### THE ETHICAL NOISE OF RWAIS SOUND

Western sound media, such as the telephone, radio, and sound recording, conveyed information through technologies of energetic sound transduction, material fixation, broadcasting, and amplification. *Rwais* sound practices, on the contrary, enabled the memorizing and transmission of information through a regulated combination of “rhythm, mode and structure” (Schuyler 1979). While modern sound transmission came to be conceptualized in terms of “signal” vs “noise” (Thompson 2013), *rwais* sound can best be described as signal *and* noise. If technical noise had to be controlled and eliminated at all costs in the name of an hypothetical “pure” signal, the inevitable erasure and distortion of information as part of *rwais* mediation amounts to a form of ethical noise, I propose. As a result of subjective mediation, ethical noise was produced through the moral and poetic evaluation of information proper to *rwais* expression. *Rwais* sound was thus no less efficient than western communication technology, but only differently (in-)efficient. Jonathan Sterne (2003) already made this point demonstrating that (sonic) content was never just “reproduced” through sound technologies, but always produced anew as part of ideologically driven social-material practices. With its mediating, ethical, and poetic dimension, *rwais* sound resulted from a particularly situated plural sound practice. Grounded in a local sense of place and community, *rwais*

sound welcomed experiments with new epistemological configurations as part of their repertory of ideas. As an expression of sonic pluralism, rwais mediation amounted to a constant negotiation between the moral imperatives of their community and the promises of individual emancipation brought by modernity and technical innovations.

The notion of ethical noise resonates with today's concerns by media professionals for the moral necessity to create the conditions for "ethically responsible media" (Dwyer 2012). While the purposes of media to inform, educate, and entertain remain constant, Dwyer notes, an ethical media that informs a democratic citizenry is paramount. Schuyler (1979) interestingly makes a similar observation about rwais songs: "A song is not meant to be mere entertainment, but rather, it should contain a message, either a lesson about human nature and life in general, a commentary on a specific situation, or both." Although rwais expression was certainly under surveillance by local and colonial authorities, it yet embodied a form of independent media, operating between various religious, political, and economical forces. It is worth mentioning the fact that an independent media remains wishful thinking in Morocco up to this day, as recent cases of sentenced journalists and bloggers unfortunately demonstrate.<sup>8</sup>

### THE META-RAIS: ALI FAIQ AS CULTURAL AND EPISTEMIC MEDIATOR

When considering Ali Faiq's chosen method for engaging with the Pathé recordings and re-introducing old songs in the rwais community, I argue



<sup>8</sup> Freedom of information in contemporary Morocco is indeed far from being a reality, as the website of the NGO "Reporters without Borders" attests: <https://rsf.org/en/behind-morocco-s-throne-day-journalists-are-being-persecuted>







that he very much acted as a mediator. First as a *cultural* mediator between the rwaï community and external agents, like myself, including other researchers, cultural promoters, journalists, state representatives, and non-Ishlhin music audiences. Second, as an *epistemic* mediator between rwaï modes of knowledge-production and exterior ones, such as academic historiography and colonial epistemology. Ali Faiq thus appears like a new kind of rwaï, indeed a *meta-rwaï*, because his ways of mediating are not restricted by the conventional rules of rwaï expression.

While a comprehensive rwaï historiography yet remains to be written, Ali Faiq opened up a new path in this direction. At times in which rwaï expression is threatened by extinction, he calls for a better institutional recognition of this particular art form. By stating that “preservation is not only about recording songs, but also about circulating them and re-integrating them into the repertory,” Ali Faiq comes close to current tendencies in applied ethnomusicology.<sup>9</sup> Highly politicized in Morocco, the field of cultural heritage is simultaneously being claimed by the state, minority leaders, and foreign promoters. This inevitably turns Ali Faiq’s position into an uncomfortable one, which is perhaps best illustrated by his *Iskitin* CD. Although rwaï conventions are themselves not devoid of contradictions—between a celebration of “tradition” and attempts to negotiate and transmit this heritage into the future—they do, however, provide a context for experimenting with new approaches in music creation, community building, and education. People like Ali Faiq certainly have a decisive role to play in this configuration, through their capacity to mediate between the

<sup>9</sup> For a general overview of these practices, see *Ethnomusicology Forum* Vol. 21, No. 2, August 2012.

rwais community, commercial music circles, academic discourse, and, to some extent, state institutions.

As part of a series of workshops organized by Ali Faiq, young musicians were given the opportunity to play with experienced rwais and familiarize themselves with their repertory and instruments. The rwais repertory needs to evolve, Ali Faiq comments, otherwise it will die. His experience in commercial fusion music and as an active participant in rwais conventions makes him an ideal agent of transmission and innovation. The knowledge he acquired about the Pathé recordings, about early recording techniques, and about archives in general represents a significant addition to the rwais repertory of ideas and practices, and should be part of the transmission process in the future. The priority for defenders of social justice today in Morocco lies in “economic and educational opportunities” for all citizens (Boum 2007) and for minorities especially. This certainly requires a structural decolonization of knowledge and learning in Moroccan institutions. Ali Faiq's project provides a significant example in this direction, and as such it could be a model for future initiatives.

Besides education, the greater inclusion of women will possibly come to play a crucial role in rwais expression. The rise of a new generation of feminist voices brought a series of changes in the legislation pertaining to women's rights and gender equality. According to Fatima Sadiqi (2014), a new feminist “Center” emerged from the Arab Spring protests in 2011 as an ideological middle-ground where secular and Islamist paradigms confront each other over women's rights. In 2012, Fatima Tabaamrant was the first raissa to become



Raissa Fatima Tabaamrant, 2016

a member of the Moroccan parliament, advocating for Amazigh and women's rights. This certainly is a sign that positions are moving in Morocco, progressively generating more space for public female expression. Ali Faiq's research activities and cultural initiative are part of these transformations, informed by persisting inequalities faced by ethnic and gendered minorities in Morocco. His project emerged from an awareness that knowledge can provide the means to overcome oppression. Almost a hundred years after Abouche Tamassit's appearance on the Pathé recordings, raissa Tabaamrant expresses a similar idea in the following verses:

Life is no longer what it was.  
This is the time of knowledge,  
Even for those who've never been to school.  
Grab your chance, sisters!  
It is never too late to learn.  
- Fatima Tabaamrant, in Sadiqi 2014