

**‘Get back home, you ūt-‘Atiq’: Lhoussain Simour on the Amazigh singing poet Mrīrīda ūt-‘Atiq and her memory in contemporary Morocco**

Here Lhoussain Simour is interviewed by Itzea Goikolea-Amiano on the Amazigh singing poet Mrīrīda ūt-‘Atiq, an emblematic figure in Middle Atlas Amazigh culture.

**IGA: Tell us a little bit about the well-known female poet Mrīrīda n’ait ‘Atiq, or Mrīrīda ūt-‘Atiq as she is locally known, and how you became interested in her.**

LS: First, I would like to thank you very much for inviting me to talk about Mrīrīda n’ait ‘Atiq, the legendary and emblematic Amazigh poet.

I would say that the real surprising moment came when I heard her name in a discussion held by one of my teachers, Professor Sadik Rddad, during a lecture at the Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre in Fez where I was an MA student. The discussion was on subalternity and “the epistemic violence” levied against the little-known narratives of Moroccan cultural history. The name was mentioned in passing as the focus was on other theoretical issues about culture; but I was really amazed and I kept wondering all the way through the lecture how such an unknown figure would creep into academic circles. I already knew that she existed, but I did not expect at all that she would be mentioned that day and in a classroom... and this brings me to your question.

Actually, the word “ūt-‘Atiq” was of momentous recurrence where I was born – in a remote area in the outskirts of Azilal, in the Middle Atlas mountains in Morocco. In my childhood, the first time I heard the name “ūt-‘Atiq” was through my father’s cousins and through the grown-ups who lived in our *dowār* (tribal settlement). They used the name to teasingly address, most of the time in a derogative manner, the girls of the family or any of the neighbourhood girls and women who showed excessive use of Berber make-up, or went alone to the *souks* (weekly-held markets), or appeared daringly in front of other men. They would, for example, address the girls in the following ways: *Kshem jogā a-ūt-‘Atiq* (get back home, you ūt-‘Atiq); *mas tanzāght a-ūt-‘Atiq* (where are you going, you ūt-‘Atiq); *ghūrī yat ūt-‘Atiq jugā* (I have an ūt-‘Atiq at home). These are all metaphors that convey a scornful attitude, and they are constructed in such a way to warn and bring back into order our Mrīrīdas who would show slight gender deviations, either by innocently mixing with men, or by behaving in a way that was not communally acceptable. What is extremely interesting about the metaphors embedded in the derisive warnings of the adults is that they endowed Mrīrīda with a discursive presence in the collective consciousness of the Middle Atlas mountains communities. The dangers that men felt in having “a Mrīrīda at home” called into question the fundamental premises of Moroccan society, urban and rural alike, which have relegated women within the unconcealed structure of patriarchy, replete with its infinite stereotypical images of oppression, restriction of movement, subjugation and marginalisation.

When her name was mentioned during the in-class discussion, I became very much interested in her experience primarily because she came from my region, and I started to investigate whether anything had been written about her. I came across *Les chants de la Tassaout* by René Euloge, which documents her poetry. I also came across Fatima Sadiqi's *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco*. As far as I understand it, this is one of the first academic sources from a department of English studies in a Moroccan university to have mentioned Mrīrīda and to have paid any academic attention to her life story. Sadiqi, who has analysed the different expressive genres that women make use of in *tamazīght* and Moroccan *dārija*, has read and discussed a few verses by Mrīrīda. She has found – and she is right – “creativity, boldness and moral strength” in the poems of Mrīrīda ūt-'Atiq, the “poor illiterate Berber woman living in a remote mountainous village” at a period in the history of Morocco where women were denied the least of rights.<sup>1</sup> For her, Mrīrīda's art “is a prototype of the authentic oral female literature of Moroccan women.”<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, and in an article published in conference proceedings edited by Sadiqi, Osire Glacier mentions one of Mrīrīda's poems. Glacier's article focuses on the intersection of power with the production of narratives about feminism in Morocco, including feminist narratives themselves. Adopting an empirical approach, she has attempted to retrieve forgotten figures and narratives that articulate early precolonial, colonial and postcolonial feminist consciousness in Morocco. She argues that Mrīrīda's voice contests the social conditions of the women of her times, and that the discourse on modern Moroccan feminism is the continuity of an indigenous feminist consciousness, perpetuated through national and cultural traditions but overlooked by mainstream literature.<sup>3</sup>

**Can you tell us about Mrīrīda and her world? What would her context be like in terms of geographical location, the historical time she lived through, and how that shaped the way she lived as well as her sung poetry?**

Mrīrīda was an early-20<sup>th</sup> century Amazigh singing poet and a courtesan whose physical wanderings in the mountainous villages and valleys where she grew up are retold in her oral and aural poetry. Her story coincided with the eve of French colonial encroachment in Morocco. She was a sort of a troubadour artist who moved a lot through the mountainous villages and valleys of Tasāout and Azilal. She lived there in oblivion for some time and then vanished in silence. She was born in Megdāz, a small village that stretches across the Tasāout valley deep in the Atlas Mountains of Azilal, which means that she came, as I did, from one of the most marginalised and forgotten regions of the country. However, what was exceptional about her was that, although she was illiterate, she was incredibly talented in the improvisation of poems; she

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<sup>1</sup> Sadiqi, *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco*, 235.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Osire Glacier “Pouvoir et Production du Savoir: Le cas du Féminisme Marocain,” in *Femmes et Nouveaux Médias dans la Région Méditerranéenne*, ed. Fatima Sadiqi (Fez: Centre ISIS pour Femmes et Développement, 2012): 47-63.

excelled in the art of what is locally known as *tandāmt* (oral poetry). We do not know exactly what her name was; but through one of her poems, she acquainted the readers with her nickname instead. She states, “People called me Mrīrīda, the agile rennet of meadows,” a nickname that provides the hint of a poetic image, which, in turn, positions this figure, controversial in her own times, at the centre of a knot of ambivalent discourses in which shame and honour, desires and dreams, sufferings and the joys of life coalesce together. What we also know through her poetry is that she was forced, as was the case with other young girls in rural parts of Morocco, into marriage at an early age, and that she then eloped, probably because her freedom and artistic talent were hampered and undermined by her marital condition. She later found herself entangled in a brothel in Azilal, locally known as *taqāt*, which literally means “the narrowest path of a dried stream.”

The regular visitors to the *taqāt* quarter – *Gūm* soldiers,<sup>4</sup> French soldiers, native merchants, traders and farmers, (by which I mean the brothel goers) – certainly had the chance to listen to Mrīrīda’s poems. However, the turning point in her story came when she met a French instructor, René Euloge, who used to teach in Demnāt, a few miles away from Azilal. Her songs and poetry are now available to us thanks to him. This is something of a twist of fate, as she has been resurrected in a context other than her own; that is to say, in France through a teacher of French. In *Les Chants de la Tassaout*, Euloge tells us that in 1927-28, on an errand to Azilal, he met a French soldier who soon invited him to visit Mrīrīda and the two other girls with whom she shared a room in the *taqāt* quarter. The three women used to travel across the region and perform their musical spectacles for the Amazigh Souk goers. Euloge, who learnt and spoke the local dialect, fell in love with her poetic sensitivity, her voice, and her words. He taped the poems, translated them into French and documented them in *Les Chants de la Tassaout*. Literature about Mrīrīda’s life story is scarce. A few webpages have mentioned her, but they lack insightful reflections on her sung poetry. Nearly all the discussions that have taken place in the public domain of the internet either reproduce the translated French versions of her poems or hint at the overwhelming obscurities in which she has, for so long, lived.

Mrīrīda, however, subverts the Western male’s gaze and the discourse on identity and difference because she is made visible through her poems and not through Euloge’s representational categorisations. She has managed to speak about herself and express her identity and belonging through her intuitive power of creativity and through the expressive forces of her songs and poems. She becomes the “master” of her own narrative as an Oriental woman endowed with substantial feminine potential wherein her agency is affirmed and her poetry remains an intrigue to the French visitor. Very revealing in one of her poems is that it is replete with signs of resistance to the

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<sup>4</sup> Moroccan *Gūm* Soldiers, *les Goumiers Marocains* in French, were indigenous soldiers in the service of the Moroccan Sultan who also served in the French army between 1908 and 1956. The *Gūms* were used during the French colonial occupation of Morocco up to the early 1930s. They then served in Italy and France during the Second World War and in Indochina from 1946 to 1954.

coloniser. In allegorical overtones that are both liberating and insightful, she addresses Euloge saying:

*For you, you, it will be better for you*

*If you go back to your country*

*I know that you frequently have to swap your girlfriends*

*You accept any key*

*Because you are like an old wooden lock*

Mrīrīda excelled in the art of improvising and singing Amazigh poems in a context where artistic production was dominated by men. Her songs addressed themes related to the body and its shifting discourses as a woman's concern in a tribal context, the representation of the woman in a male-oriented Amazigh society. She blurred the boundaries between shame and honour through her poems and through her nomadic experiences. Not least, her nimbleness and skilful imagination in assembling words and composing/singing through metaphors, simile and satire have conspicuously singularised this poet's artistic creativity and she has thus acquired the seal of a *tandāmt* (professional poetess). Part of her poetry, related to or induced by ardent sexual desires, involves well-knitted motifs and images that are strung together in a romantic fashion dealing exclusively with the exasperating pains of love, unhappiness and departures of lovers that yield a melancholic poetic aura. She deals with real and imagined situations, contemplating issues that have plagued her individual and collective experiences such as separation and loneliness, unrequited love, gossip, betrayal, death, and expatriation in a foreign land.

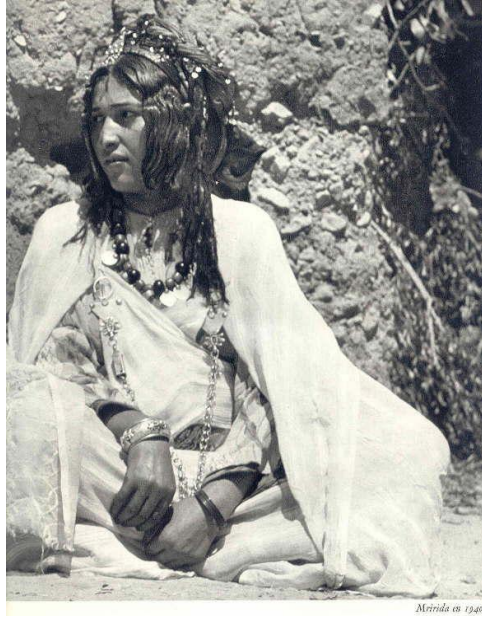
**Can you tell us about the different meanings ūt-'Atiq's memory evokes – does it have different nuances, for example, when she's evoked as the author of a great poem or when referring to her daring chants? Is her memory recalled in recent cultural production at all?**

As I said, Mrīrīda came to prominence in a period of time wherein troubadouring and public performances were dominated by men – although women also sung and recited poetry privately. By venturing into the outside world, she transgressed gender boundaries and shaped the concept of mid-twentieth century Amazigh womanhood and identity in an emancipative way. The very conservative Amazigh society of the Atlas Mountains was challenged by a rebellious subject who was in constant negotiation of gender boundaries and in continuous contestation of social categories. To my own understanding and based on the context where I was raised, ūt-'Atiq's poems have given rise to a gender consciousness that thrives among the Amazigh women of the region. I still remember that on Thursdays, when the house was empty of men, as they would leave to go to the *Souk*, the women and girls of my family, who would most of the time be joined by other women from the neighbourhood, would gather around the

tea tray to sing. The singing was often made up of daring songs that might be by ūt-'Atiq's herself or by another Amazigh source. What struck me most was that the Thursday singing would never be brought into wedding parties or into any ceremony where the presence of men was noticed. Later, this made me feel that the songs talked about secrets that were to be kept from men, as they were permeated by erotic, sexual and transgressive metaphors that violated moral and social boundaries. They were about gender issues that threatened the patriarchal order in a certain sense. At the very least, I came to believe strongly that Thursdays in my village were expressive moments of joy and delight to women, and were symbolic of their *joie de vivre*, freedom and resistance.

I once asked my mother if ūt-'Atiq evokes any memories for her. She said she heard of the name and that it was initially associated with immoral behaviour but she herself never knew who she was: "Maybe the early generation does," she said. I asked her if the songs they used to sing were of any connection to ūt-'Atiq's; but to my surprise she replied that she could not tell because while these were mostly well-known, their source was not. I tried to translate an Arabic song into Tamazight for her and she said that there was another version that was a closer translation; but she thought that people might have substituted the words with others or taken some out. So, ūt-'Atiq's songs and poems certainly existed in different versions, as they had probably been transformed to suit the public taste.

Fictionalised accounts of ūt-'Atiq have become visible in the last few years in 21st-century Morocco. In 2017, the Moroccan TV channel 2M showed Kamal Hackkar's road-movie musical documentary *Tasanū, Tayrinū* (2017). The title literally means "my liver, my love," and it metaphorically refers to a devoted passion, insofar as the "liver" denotes the expression and confession of ardent emotions in the Amazigh context. Hackkar's documentary deals with the concept of love in this Amazigh context through a heavy focus on Mrīrīda's love poems. In 2012, Lahcen Zinoun's feature film *Mawshuma (The Tattooed Woman)*, translated in French as *Femme Ecrite* (2012) came out. Zinoun's controversial work is based on Mrīrīda's story, and has been attacked by some Islamist leaders in the Moroccan government for its scenes of nudity and for the blunt exposure of the main character's body. Zinoun's film revolves around the discourse of tattooing as a significant component of memory. *Tasanū, Tayrinū* and *Mawshuma*, though in varying degrees, interrogate the depths of Moroccan society; probing deeper into the 'other' Morocco, peopled by figures that are eclipsed from the historical record. I think that further investigative research needs to be carried out on Moroccan figures such as Mrīrīda. I am quite convinced that there are still many of them whose stories are now lost to us.



Mrīda ūt-‘Atiq in the 1940s, the only picture available in the public domain, retrieved from Lhoussain Azergui’s “Mririda N’Ait Attik, un Destin Amazigh!” <http://neocultureamazighe.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/12/14/mririda-nait-attik-un-destin-amazigh/>, published on December 14, 2013.