

# An Ethnographic Approach to Women's Identity Celebrating in Folklore: 'Ahwash Ntfrkhin' as a Case Study

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## **Abstract**

The paper is about the discourse used by women in ahwash (a folk dance in Sous, Morocco). It aims at documenting the way ahwash ntfrkhin, (girls' ahwash) articulates an empowering and often challenging discourse via performance and lyrics. Though there are many folkloric performances in Sous, ahwash ntfrkhin stands as the epitome of all the dances since it grants women the opportunity to enjoy autonomy and freedom of expression and experience. Freedom of expression implies that women can express freely and outwardly a particular feminine world view. Yet, freedom of experience refers to the fact that females experience themselves as active subjects during this performance. The study unfolds that women are successful in challenging male dominion in ahwash ntfrkhin showing their solidarity and unity against any patriarchal domination and celebrate themselves as independent beings. The study also underlines that folklore, though oftentimes gender-biased, subverts patriarchy and gives evidence that women can be more fruitful if they are given the same chances and freedom that men enjoy. For this reason, an all-round investigation of women in folklore emphasizing gender equality is pre-requisite.

**Keywords:** folklore, ahwash ntfrkhin, Soussi women, self-celebration, resistance.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the eighteenth and the mid of the nineteenth centuries, folklore was labelled 'popular antiquities' suggesting that amateur scholars were "impressed with the antique character of it" (Leach 1968: 18). During that period, it was never probed in relation to culture. In 1846, William Thoms coined the term 'folklore' consisting of two words, 'folk' and 'lore'. 'Folk' implies any group of people distinguished by their traditions, legends, sayings, songs, dances, and music. 'Lore', for its part, refers to what people in common perform (dance, music), make (architecture, art, craft), relate (tales, legends, proverbs), and believe (traditions, customs) in a folk community. Assigned to both the oral and customary traditions crafted by folk gatherings and to the scientific investigation of such traditions, folklore has been given due importance since the late nineteenth century as amateur collectors started giving precedence to qualified scholars and other similar supporting institutions. Thereafter, folklore emerged

as an academic discipline articulating its own content and methodology. Being no longer perceived as something amateurish associated with 'primitive' cultures, folklore has come to stand a genuine incarnation of the thoughts, attitudes, values, and beliefs of specific communities (Propp 1984: 38).

Many researchers have depicted folklore as gender-biased (Radner and Lanser 1987, Kowawole 1998, Kousaleos 1999, Sadiqi 2003, Ennaji 2008, Sekkal 2012). Women are commonly deprecated in folklore. And when accorded some consideration, it only fits their prevalent image as evils, victims, and failures or their traditional role as docile mothers and submissive housewives. Not with standing, such stereotypical conceptualization of women in folklore and the one-dimensional interpretation of its data should be revisited as folklore also serves as a scope for subverting gender-biased discourse. This study is an attempt to overthrow the seclusion and/or misconception of women in folklore. It investigates women's performance in a folk dance known as ahwash ntfrkhin (girls' ahwash) in Sous, a Tashlhit-(a variant of Amazigh) speaking area in the south west of Morocco. It emphasizes that folklore is also a way to subvert the patriarchal ideology. Hence, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1- Do Soussi women find a way in folklore, via folk dances, to express themselves as independent entities?
- 2- To what extent does folklore assign Soussi women a space for freely celebrating their femininity?
- 3- Are Soussi women successful in creating and maintaining an independent, expressive culture opposed to men's?
- 4- Does folklore grant women a challenging power discourse?

Based on culture reflector approach (Dundes 1968) and critical ethnography (Harvey and McDonald 1993), the present paper is an attempt to explore how ahwash ntfrkhin grants women self-government as well as freedom of experience and expression and to probe the challenging discourse it conveys.

## **II. Review of The Literature**

Epitomizing everyday life, Soussi folk dances have a diversity of forms that people have been loyal to for generations. Firstly, Ahiyyad of Haha is an exclusively male dance proper to Haha in the

region of Essaouira, and famed for its use of a local flute. It is performed through hand-clapping and feet-stamping, imparting with a virile impact. Secondly, Ait Taskiwine is named after its region which is a village, nearly two-hundred kilometres far from Agadir, the Sous region hub. The group of dancers discipline themselves into white tunics and turbans and vigorously dance shoulder to shoulder. Thirdly, Ismgane is found in several Soussi regions. Being the plural of 'ismg', meaning a slave, it confirms that this dance is performed only by coloured performers. They use large drums and metallic castanets and perform movements requiring physical stamina. Lastly, Tarwa n Sidi Hmad Oumoussa, translated as the sons of Sidi Hmad Oumoussa, are descendants of Saint of Tazwalt, located in the southwest of Sous. Originally, youthful participants performed physical exercises in preparation for their martial duties as marksmen. However, with the disappearance of wars, the natives have adapted it into a form of collective acrobatic dance.

What is remarkable in the aforementioned performances is the absence of female performers though they take part in ahwash. Literally meaning a dance, the term 'ahwash' refers to a collective dance performed in the region of Sous. It is found in many forms and enacted to the accompaniment of large frame drums known as *tiluna*, plural of *talunt* (Bouزيد Algansani 1996: 1). Ahwash conventionally requires no less than twenty participants for a simple performance and more than one hundred for a spectacular one. Since large groups cannot be transported over large distances, each tribe has accordingly developed its own distinctive ahwash emphasising, therefore, "the uniqueness of each separate community" (Schuyler, 1979: 72). This dance, to quote Bohlman (1988: 100), is "performed by local villagers and differentiated according to each village, whose boundaries therefore circumscribe it". The performance of ahwash, like other musical forms, is rule-bound. Apart from not being commercial, it requires a large number of dancers, improvised poetry, dancing and drumming (Sekkal 2008). Furthermore, it has to be performed in the open air, not behind closed doors. Accordingly, the dance is not only a form of entertainment, but also a socially weighty act as "it provides an opportunity for the elders to school children and teenagers and raise them to respect the communal and family values and rules" (Boum 2007: 227).

There are many ahwash performances; some of them are mixed performances such as the ahwash of Aoulouz in the region of Taroudant and the ahwash of Imintanout in the region of Marrakesh. In the ahwash of Aoulouz, several men sit on the ground with musical instruments consisting of drums and a circular iron piece, known as *naqous*. As the drums get started, male singing follows, and women chant back synchronizing with male dancing and singing. An Aoulouz band consists of 'ariyas' (the

experienced master-conductor of ahwash), five drummers, sometimes five male dancers, and five matching female dancers. The ahwash of Imintanout is like that of Aoulouz, but the difference lies in the dance; women dance and perform apart. Not with standing, these performances deviate from the canonical norms of ahwash as they lack the spontaneity proper to improvised lyrics. Both ahwash dances also cast women as quasi-passive participants guided by male counterparts. By contrast, female dancers are independent and self-celebrating in ahwash ntrfrkhin.

Local natives are quite familiar with the term 'ahwash ntrfrkhin' (girls' ahwash), 'tfrkhin' being the plural of 'tafrukht' meaning girl. The word 'tafrukht' implies that the female is both young and single; this does not mean that wives and divorcees, as well as widows, would not join in, especially that they actually have a leading role in this collective dance. What characterizes ahwash ntrfrkhin is that it is a public event through which women emphasize their subjectivities as distinct identities, there by challenging the low social positions ascribed to them within the Soussi community. This performance is also the only public dance in Sous which grants women freedom for self-expression, and free voicing of feeling, suffering, and outlook bravely before their entire community (Oubla 2008: 88).

Many works have investigated ahwash as a communal dance that characterizes the region of Sous. They display its forms, characteristics, and functions within the society (Bohlman 1988, Bouزيد Algansani 1996, Boum 2007). They also compare between ahwash and other performances (Schuyler 1979, Horiuchi 2001). Other studies have probed the folk dance as the most significant cultural form shared by Jews and Muslims in Sous (Levin 2017) and as a traditional performance that still survives in some Israeli communities (Elmedlaoui 2005, Elmedlaoui & Azaryahu 2014). Other studies have emphasized the role of women in ahwash ntrfrkhin, their performance, and contribution (Oubla 2008, Sekkal 2008). However, studies that scrutinize women as crucial, independent subjects who celebrate themselves in ahwash and that explores ahwash ntrfrkhin as a scope for subverting gender-biased discourse is relatively absent in the field.

### III. Methodology

Three techniques were used to gather information. Firstly, direct observation of several performances of ahwash ntrfrkhin was depended on in various rural communes of Sous. Secondly, interviews were conducted with some performers of different ahwashes ntrfrkhin about the specificities of each performance. Thirdly, the use of videos was prerequisite to focus on the clothes, movements, and lyrics of the performers.

This study is based on non-random sample, precisely the snowball sample. Aicha Tinlouz, an

ahwash well-known poetess in the tribes of Sous, provided a human link between me and some poetesses of ahwash ntrkkin. After the first contact with these poetesses, I had easy accessibility to different performers and drummers of ahwash ntrkkin of different regions of Sous, namely Idaounidif in Taroudant, Idagougmar in Tafraout, and Idaousmlal in Tiznit. Likewise, the mastery of the local Amazigh variety, Tashlhit, helped me to obtain introductions to many participants of Ahwash and to understand the lyrics and translate them into English.

This study depends on two methods of data analysis: the culture-reflector approach and critical ethnography. In culture-reflector approach, “the emphasis is clearly upon what the lore can tell the investigator about the folk” (Dundes 1968: 47). It therefore uses the lore as a tool to understand the folk. Critical ethnography sees that the meanings of folklore cannot “exist in isolation but relate to the cultures or social structures in which people live and operate” (Harvey and McDonald 1993: 184). It stresses that any folklore item such as ahwash cannot be understood in isolation from the culture in which it is performed. This study considers ahwash as a form of “ethnographic autobiography” and “a kind of popular pulse” (Dundes 1965:277) that springs from and customizes the needs of its performers.

#### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data includes two main parts. While the first part discusses women’s self-government in Ahwash ntrkkin, the second part depicts women’s defiance through performance and lyrics respectively.

##### A. Autonomy in Ahwash Ntrkkin

Soussi women usually have limited control over their own lives and constrained authority to make independent decisions. However, on the day of the ahwash ntrkkin, autonomy seems to be associated with women as they bedeck themselves and mastermind the entire folk event.

Women gather in a house, which men have no access to, for hours to attire themselves. They usually wear *tamlhaft* (unshaped cloth covering their body), local Amazigh leather slippers, and silver jewellery— such as bracelets, clasps, rings, bangles, belts, amulets, as well as fibulas, whose artforms differ from tribe to tribe. They also henna tattoo their hands and feet with different tribe-specific motifs. They wear kohl, a black matter used to darken the eyelids, blush, and lipstick. In some tribes, girls do not cover their hair during the performance as they are accustomed to in ordinary days. For them, it is an opportunity to attract unmarried men’s attention. Accordingly, a slight difference in clothing between unmarried and married women is displayed as it is the case in the ahwash of Idaounidif in Taroudant. Virgins put roses and some basil leaves around their heads as a sign of virginity and fertility, married

women put on basil only, and widows as well as divorced women put on but a fabric band around their heads indicating that they have already been through marriage. This ahwash, therefore, comes to stand as the only occasion where women are granted the festive chance of highlighting their identity and celebrating their silenced femininity.

After beautifying themselves, women start singing in an apparently disorganized way by means of announcing the commencement of the performance. In so doing, they instruct the ariyas (the head of the ahwash), the musicians, and the spectators into readying themselves for the performance, prior to the conventional emergence of female dancers and singers. If someone fails to respond, especially a musician, he is likely to be deprived of joining the ahwash as she might stir up trouble to female performers in particular and the ahwash in general.

Even though a male ariyas is required, there is also a tanddamt (poetess) or at most three tinddamin (poetesses) who preside(s) over the ahwash. Standing before or in the middle of the row, the poetess(s) improvise(s) lyrics and change(s) the rhythm without necessarily coordinating with the ariyas. She or they hold sway over the complete or inexperienced dancers and singers and even over the ariyas, whose authority is downsized to leading the male musicians.

And just as they enjoy the freedom to start the ahwash, female performers enjoy likewise the freedom of terminating it in the event of any disruption or in case the musicians get out of tune. Before putting a premature end to the festive event, female performers generally lament the situation or openly castigate troublemakers severely via vitriolic lyrics. Yet, such situations stand as a rare occurrence as Soussi tribes give much weight to this folk dance.

Celebrating and foregrounding their womanness, female performers try to exemplify their festive power, in this celebratory public moment. They avail themselves of certain rights which they are typically denied in everyday life. As they go singing and dancing in public, they concurrently celebrate their self-controlling power. As an artform, ahwash ntrkkin, therefore, conveys some cultural messages embodying the belief that Soussi women are capable of self-control and acting independently and hence entitled to developing their selfhood and enjoying autonomy. Besides the dignifying position it grants to women, ahwash ntrkkin is a framework for female challenge to male power.

##### B. Women’s Defiance in Ahwash Ntrkkin

Both Soussi men and women are socialized into embodying the requirements of the roles they are assigned. Generally, men are in charge of family welfare as well as sharing in communal decision-making. However, Soussi women are cast into procreation and home duties. Women in ahwash ntrkkin try accordingly to question these traditional

gender roles via their challenging, self-celebrating dance and lyrics.

**a) Challenge through Performance :**

In ahwash ntrfrkhin, women sing and dance in harmony; they sway to and fro in a rhythm alternating between slow and fast. Yet, as they so celebrate, there often happens to be some husbands who would feel jealous as they believe that their wives are exhibiting their charms and delights in public. Consequently, they would ban them from partaking the folk dance. However, some daring wives would not keep silent as they scheme to outwit their husbands' might. Covered up from top to toe so as not to be identified, they stand behind the row of female dancers and singers and whisper their verses to the tanddamt mastering the ahwash. Though their identities are hidden, they nevertheless succeed in voicing their reproach and protest by making them uttered by other women. Thus, they manage to voice their creativity, though done from a concealed, disempowered position.

In ahwash of asdaw, also known as ahwash of addal, proper to the Taфраout region, women also react against their husbands' coercion. Their folk dance is named after a long shared piece of cloth that women put over their heads to cover their faces. Addal is an integral part of the folk dance in that it becomes distinct from other ahwashes ntrfrkhin. Addal allows women to see visibly through without being seen. They, therefore, sing and dance, unknown to the audience. Wives, in this folk dance, can also participate even when husband banned. Attired in the same style and jewellery shapes, they can take part in this ahwash without being noticed.

It is worth noting that this shared head gear emblemizes a sharing of circumstances, problems, and sufferings. It stands also as a sign of 'sisterhood', implying a strong feeling of friendship and support. It also stands in the way of patriarchal tyranny since a husband would be misled if he suspects his wife's participation in a performance. Her contribution would be forcefully denied by other women and, in this context, hardly provable.

Husbands' authoritative does not impede wives from participating and freely expressing their concerns. Though physically unseen, these Soussi women are visible as they symbolically weaken the yoke of male power and, hence, switchover from the periphery to the centre of power. Their solidarity, in ahwash ntrfrkhin, can be perceived as female collaborative attempt to resist gender stereotypes that constrain their roles, as documented in their challenging lyrics.

**b) Lyrical Challenging**

Women have the entire freedom and self-assigned right in ahwash ntrfrkhin to vocalize all that they wish for, without interruption. In so doing, they express a particular feminine world view. Thus,

ahwash ntrfrkhin can equate with consciousness-raising (CR) groups tasked to "provide women with a voice", according to Case (1988: 68). The latter also states that such groups set up "a situation in which women could begin to articulate what is felt like to be a woman".

In ahwash ntrfrkhin, women select and discuss a topic related to their experience, such as husbandhood, economic dependence, spinsterhood, and any variety of related issues. In CR groups, women meet in small groups, usually consisting of a dozen women or more and take turns in choosing any topic pertinent to their life experience. Consequently, no one dominates the exchange. Similarly, in ahwash ntrfrkhin, the tanddamt or tinddamin, (poetess or poetesses) who conduct(s) the ahwash, position themselves amidst the row and announce(s) a topic; then, the other women elaborate it by narrating stories relating to their own experience.

Sometimes, male spectators would step in to heckle lady participants. There ensues a male/female lyrical exchange. Once engaged in power challenging dialogue, males would seek to display their patriarchal power, satirizing and criticizing, and sometimes giving in to sheer humiliating. However, ahwash ladies would not keep silent but rebel against male fearful bias. Through improvised lyrics, women would proclaim their innermost self and have their counterparts sensitized to their actual images, as opposed to the male secure stereotyping pertaining to their community.

In the midst of the performance of ahwash of Idawsmalal in Tiznit, a male attendant intervenes to attack women by singing the following verses:

<i>Transcription</i>	<i>Translation</i>
/tramt atgimt zund irgazni/	You desire to be like men.
/isn rbbi magigunt imuni/	But only God is aware of your 'abilities'.
/darunt tilkin Ro qllal dils imsadn Rimawnnunti/	You are endowed with lice in your heads and a sharp tongue in your mouth.
/irgazn li itabçan rri nunt zund koninti adgani/	Men who follow and advocate your advice are womanly.

The tanddamt replies:

<i>Transcription</i>	<i>Translation</i>
/atig itmRarin/	Glory to women.
/madurisin slhq ntmRart iga ankkar/	The one who ignores the woman's deeds is ungrateful.
/atig itmRarin/	Glory to women (is used as a refrain by female performers).
/tga kolut tamusni/	She is endowed by

	reason and wisdom
/atig itmRarin/	Glory to women.
/ulns iga kululhnant sirgazzn/	Her heart is full of good, not evil towards man.
/atig itmRarin/	Glory to women.
/zr amksab lidarila labas/	Look at the beggar who became rich.
/atig itmRarin/	Glory to women.
/tzrt aglid li iskrn Rtilila taglit/	And look at the king who declared Titrit as the queen.
/atig itmRarin/	Glory to women.

Actually, there is a tendency to divide things into pairs. Each opposition can be analyzed as a hierarchy in which the negative and the weak side is always seen as feminine. The association of reason and wisdom with men and irrationality and foolishness with women is an instance of this binary opposition reflected in the above lyrics. The latter stress the irrationality of women as no reasonable opinions or wise judgments are likely to be found in a women’s heads but lice. They also underline that men speak wisdom and women talk nonsense. Men are believed to talk about facts, ideological notions, and other important and serious issues. However, women gossip about trivial things unceasingly. They also deprive any man who seeks or takes the advice of women of his manhood, which shows that women are considered as the “other” and men as the “self”.

Soussi women do not accept these stereotypes and try to take over a central position to affirm their resistance by crafting lyrics which withstand the bias against the fair sex. In their lines, they glorify women, stress their positive qualities, and reject inequality. They give evidence by referring to some legendary Amazigh heroines whose reason and wisdom excelled those of men. They also confirm that women, though disdained by men, are always ready to help them to reach higher positions.

All in all, folklore gives testimony that women could create new identities for themselves and offer challenges to male hegemony. The message that these women stand firm to convey is that it is high time men recognized their potential and accepted their true image as capable and competent.

**V. CONCLUSION**

Ahwash ntfkrkhin stands as the only folk dance in Sous granting women the opportunity to attire, govern, and express themselves outdoors. It has created a woman’s culture vocalizing their creativity and predisposition to excel in many fields including poetry, dance, singing, and even mastering of large-scale performances. Ahwash ntfkrkhin remains Soussi

women’s own expressive genre through which they comment their lives and channel their feelings and outlooks.

Presenting a world view contradictory to men’s, ahwash ntfkrkhin persists as an act of rebellion and challenge wherein women react against the social and cultural restraints of their immediate environment. They articulate their opposition to various forms of gender injustice and reject the restrictive negative images ascribed to them. Though led sometimes from a rather disempowered position, their resistance remains noticeable as it contributes to redressing the marginalization of women and emphasizing their positive images.

In ahwash ntfkrkhin, women deny their repressed subjectivity and celebrate themselves as active subjects. They experience freedom and identify themselves in more positive roles. They accordingly try to construct new identities in the face of social oppression. Folklore is, therefore, likely to be considered a double-edged sword. It would be used as a tool to enshrine and legitimize the values of patriarchy and meanwhile as a tool to challenge and subvert the patriarchal ideology inherent in communities.

In a nutshell, more research should be enhanced to explore folklore as a counter-hegemonic device and as an alternative cultural space to destabilize male supremacy and gender-role socialization. A multifaceted investigation of different folklore genres ought to be carried out to emphasize women’s positive qualities, autonomy, and freedom. It is high time to re-visit women’s outcast in folklore and accept them as independent and equal to men.

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