Cont Islam
DOI 10.1007/s11562-009-0085-z

Art, self-censorship, and public discourse: contemporary Moroccan artists at the crossroads

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Abstract Since the reign of King Mohammed VI in 1999, there has been a recent democratic trend in Morocco that has led to political liberalization and symbolic concessions. This essay explores how a new generation of artists is beginning to test the notions of the Islam, the monarch, and the rights of ethnic groups and women within Morocco. I argue that while they are beginning to test the limits of recent religious, social, and political reforms, these artists show self-restrain and self-censorship, creating art that falls within the public discourse allowed by the new Moroccan king.

Keywords Moroccan artists · Amazigh identity · Sufism · Gender roles · Art history

After the end of the colonial period, many European-trained Moroccan artists returned to their homeland with the goal of creating a painting style that reflected the cultural and historical identity of Morocco. Between 1964 and 1970, urban-based artists, mostly painters, began to integrate techniques, materials, and designs from local crafts and popular culture into their work and into the fine arts curriculum of Morocco's major art academy, resulting in the creation of the so-called Casablanca Group. Based at the École des Beaux Arts in Casablanca, this group included the artists Farid Belkahia and Mohammed Melehi, among others. These influential figures developed a new visual vocabulary that broke from French colonial art education to creatively manipulate the Arabic script and the visual poetics of Sufism while integrating motifs and symbols from Morocco's Berber heritage. In addition, they appropriated imagery associated with women, removing women's artistic production from its cultural context and treating women's carpet, tattoo and ceramic motifs as folkloric symbols.

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Published online: 28 February 2009

The work of these painters largely conformed to the politics of the post-colonial Moroccan nation and the monarch. After Moroccan independence in 1956, political leaders and intellectuals imposed a vision of nationalism that largely devalued ethnic pluralism and promoted the nation's Arab-Islamic heritage with the Moroccan monarch, a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, as *amir al mouminin* or Commander of the Faithful. The religious legitimacy of the monarch gave the king authority over all other political institutions in the country. King Hassan II, who ruled from 1961 until his death in 1999, used this power to stifle any political opposition. In addition, Hassan II created a Personal Status Law influenced by Islamic *Shari'a* that treated women as minors throughout their lives and limited their abilities to work, travel, and obtain a divorce.

Until recently, the artistic legacy of the Casablanca Group dominated the work of academically trained artists within Morocco, resulting in more than 50 years of art that failed to challenge the status quo. However, since the beginning of the reign of King Mohammed VI in 1999, a democratic trend has led to political liberalization and has influenced Morocco's artistic community. Although Morocco has opened discourse and opportunities unthinkable a decade ago, it is a society still marked by fear, censorship, surveillance, and detentions; freedom of expression is still limited to expression deemed unthreatening to the legitimacy of the King and his control over religious affairs (Smith and Loudiy 2005: 1074). This paper considers the work of five relatively young Moroccan artists—Mohammed Mallal, Younès Rahmoun, and Mahi Binbine, Fatima Mellal and Lalla Essaydi—in the context of recent political, religious, and cultural reforms and in retrospective comparison to the work of the Casablanca Group. I demonstrate that this new generation of artists is beginning to test conventional notions of Islam, monarchy, ethnic plurality and women's roles within Morocco; however, I argue they continue to show self-restraint and self-censorship, creating art that falls within the scope of permissible public discourse under the new Moroccan king. Morocco, under the reign of King Hassan II, had a history of repression, state censorship, surveillance, and long imprisonments; its citizenry consequently understands that there are three red lines that they cross at the risk of exorbitant fines, lengthy prison sentences, or exile: they must not question the authority of the king, Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, or the religious legitimacy of king as Commander of the Faithful. While the effect of these restrictions on Moroccan literature and the media is often discussed, less attention has been given to how these restrictions have influenced the production of fine arts. While fear of governmental repercussions continues to limit artists' aesthetic choices, recent changes in governmental policy are detectable in current artistic production.

During the 1960s, the art of the Casablanca Group gave visual form to inclusive concepts of Moroccan nationalism that arose immediately after independence from French colonial rule was achieved in 1956. Moroccan nationalism, for the first 10 years or so after independence, celebrated the rich cultural history of Morocco and its Arab, Berber, Jewish, and African history (Boum 2007: 214). However, after several failed coup attempts during the reign of King Hassan II in the 1970s, the monarch severely restricted human rights. Abdellah Hammoudi describes the authoritarianism associated with the Moroccan monarch and his control over the Moroccan nation as the relationship between a master and disciple or a father and a

son (Hammoudi 1997). The monarch has absolute power that he legitimizes through his connection to the Prophet Mohammed and his role as the commander of the faithful. King Hassan II stressed a pan-Arab identity and characterized his kingdom as a sovereign Muslim state with Arabic as its official language (Slyomovics 2005: 135). However, a new generation of artists, revived by the optimism and freedom of expression associated with the new Moroccan monarch, Mohammed VI, have been pushing and testing the red lines, as they begin to address issues that have been silently looming in the background of Moroccan public discourse since independence: the role of Berbers in a self-defined Arab nation, the practice of Islam in a way that is non-threatening to the monarch and does not confront the history of authoritarian rule in Morocco, and the promotion of women's rights without threatening the status quo.

Censorship and Amazigh identity

After Moroccan independence from colonialism, the new ruling leaders, who were largely members of the pan-Arab *Istiqlal* party, consciously countered colonial ideology that had stressed the ethno-linguistic differences between Morocco's Arab and Berber population in order to divide and conquer the nation (Boum 2007: 214). At the same time, there were Berbers among the leaders of the coups that attempted to oust King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972, leading to a crackdown on Berber political and cultural rights in Morocco.

Post-independence Morocco declared itself an Arab nation with Arabic as its official language. Hassan II declared Tamazight, the Berber language, a dialect of Arabic in his attempt to dilute the sense of "Berberness" among the population, also making it illegal for parents to give their children Berber names. However national constitutions do not always reflect social realities: Arabic is estimated to be the first language for only 55% of the Moroccan population, while the rest speak Tamazight as their first language.[1]

These restrictions and the increased governmental disenfranchisement resulted in the gradual rise of an Berber Cultural Movement in Morocco, identifying itself by the term "Amazigh," the singular and adjectival form of the word "Imazighen," which means "the free people," to divorce itself from the pejorative term Berber, which derives from an ancient Greek word that means barbarian. Amazigh activists promoted the official recognition of their language (refered to by the generic term Tamazight) and their culture as an essential component of Moroccan identity. However, the Moroccan government perceived this as threatening the integrity of Arabic, the language of the Qu'ran. Since the monarch's power is tied to the relationship between religion and state, Hassan II interpreted Amazigh activists as threatening the legitimacy of the monarchy. The government discouraged Amazigh activists from promoting and preserving their identity through threats and imprisonment. The Amazigh culture was depoliticized as folklore to be presented

[1] See Susan Slymovics. 136. She notes these figures are in dispute and many assert that the majority of Moroccans speak Tamazight as their first language.

at tourist festivals while Amazigh handwoven carpets, silver jewelry and hand-coiled pottery became important mainly as tourist commodities (Boum 2007: 214, 215)

The artists of the Casablanca Group shared an ideal of a pluralistic and open society, and often drew inspiration from Amazigh arts, recognizing that they were a crucial component of Moroccanness; at the same time they censored themselves with respect to speaking out against government repression of the Amazigh culture and language and, since they were not Imazighen, did not affiliate themselves with the Amazigh Cultural Movement.

An exemplar of this ambivalent relationship is Farid Belkahia (b. 1934), one of the most renowned members of the Casablanca group, who appropriated artistic symbols of Amazigh culture in a manner that did not threaten the monarch, Islam, and the nationalists' view of Morocco as a homogenous Arab-Islamic nation. Belkahia studied in Europe in the 1950s, returning to Morocco in 1962 to become director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca. Rather than teaching his students European artistic techniques based on three-dimensional representations of the human body and objects from nature, however, he had them study indigenous Moroccan artistic forms, such as carpet weaving, calligraphy, and pottery. Belkahia himself turned to painting on leather, stretching the animal skins over curvilinear wooden frames and then painting and dying the skin with natural plant dyes such as saffron, henna, and sumac to create dynamic irregularly shaped compositions as large as 6 ft tall and 5 ft wide that pointedly burst out of the European convention of the four-sided rectangular canvas (Benchemsi 1995: 15).

Through his choice of materials, colors, and forms, Belkahia intentionally challenged the dichotomy between artist and artisan and began to work with indigenous media, such as copper and leather. In 1980, Belkahia created a series of canvases in the form of a hand decorated with black, deep red, and orange geometric motifs reminiscent of Moroccan women's henna designs. In his *Main*, "Hand," he expressly incorporated the Tifinagh script, an ancient Amazigh writing form believed to be related to the ancient Punic script, using six Tifinagh letters to write a Moroccan Arab woman's name (Saâida) immediately above the centrally placed eye motif (see Fig. 1).[2]

Belkahia camouflaged the Tifinagh letters by painting them among similar geometric and circular forms, such as repeating triangles, diamond shapes, spirals, arrows, and circles. In addition, he used Tifinagh to write an Arab, rather than an Amazigh, woman's name. Hence, he presented the Tifinagh script as pure decoration, removing it from its historical and cultural origins and its connection to the Imazighen. Belkahia, who is not of Amazigh ancestry, professes the belief that the symbols and signs he uses, while similar to those found both in Amazigh textiles, ceramics, and tattoos as well as the Tifinagh script, are in fact symbols common to many cultures, transcending place and time. Hence he does not promote the

[2] The Tifinagh script is used today primarily by Tuareg women and blacksmiths to write short intimate messages on household objects and jewelry. The Tuareg are an Amazigh population who live in the Saharan and Sahalean regions of Mali, Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It is believed that all Imazighen used Tifinagh in the past, but the Tuareg, the least Arabized of all the Imazighen in Africa, are the only Amazigh group to have retained a written language. Tifinagh letters consist of circles and geometric forms reminiscent of Amazigh women's textile and tattoo motifs.

Fig. 1 Faird Belkahia, *Main* (*Hand*, 1980), henna on skin, 152×124.5 cm, collection of the artist

Amazigh culture but sees himself as an intermediary who creates art that bridges and connects cultures.[3] His interpretation of Morocco's post-colonial identity as a multi-cultural pluralistic society coincides with the vision of nationhood created by the Moroccan monarchy, as Belkahia reduced symbols derived from the Amazigh culture into non-political folkloric decoration (Becker 2006: 179–181).

The practice of using geometric symbols derived from Tifinagh and other Amazigh artistic forms is common to many Moroccan artists, who have formed what is often refered to by scholars as the "School of the Sign." Moroccan artists who freely appropriate Amazigh imagery from its original context and turn it into decorative folkloric surface pattern are invited to exhibit in Morocco's major museums and art galleries. At the same time artists who use their paintings to promote their Amazigh heritage remain virtually unknown. For example, Mohamed Mallal, an Amazigh activist, poet, musician, and school teacher, often paints stereotypical images of the veiled Tuareg man and includes faint letters written in the Tifinagh script on the top right corner of his canvases (see Fig. 2). Many older Amazigh activists, such as the Agadir-based artist Abdellah Aourik, told me that until recently Amazigh activists/artists could not freely use the Tifinagh script in their work, as the Tifinagh script represented anti-Arab aggression and a rejection of

[3] Farid Belkahia, interview by author, Marrakech, Morocco, 6 June 2004.

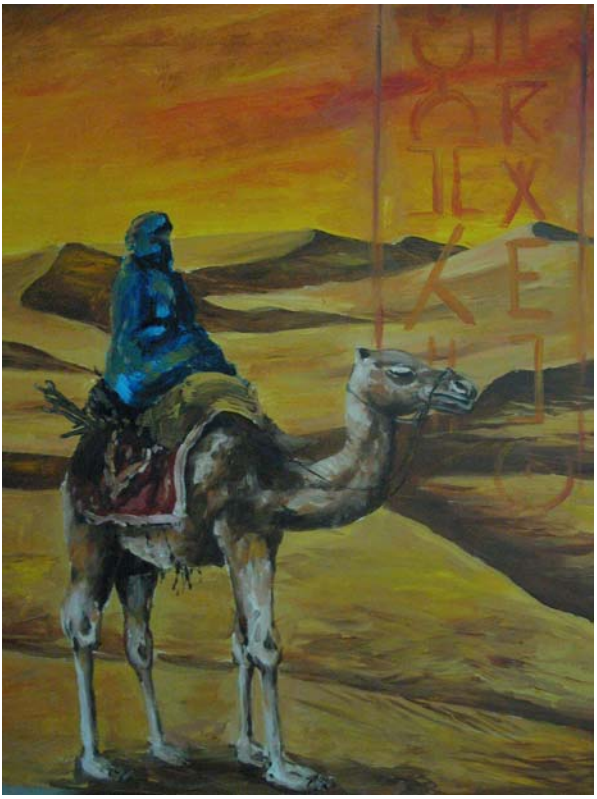

Fig. 2 Mohamed Mallal, Untitled (2004), acrylic on canvas, 92×80 cm, collection of the artist

the Arabic language and Islam.[4] Even today, many urban Moroccans view the Amazigh language as archaic and inferior to Arabic (Ennaji 2005: 73).

Mallal's work romanticizes the desert-dwelling Tuareg as living in isolated purity relative to the Berbers in North Africa. Activists also credit the Tuareg with the preservation of the Tifinagh script. At first glance, this kind of painting may seem to present a stereotypically exotic image of the noble savage, fixing the Tuareg in time and space, but it actually reinforces Amazigh political views. The Imazighen desire to create a sense of fraternity across national boundaries, promoting a transnational Amazigh identity and referencing the original Amazigh homeland, called Tamazgha, that extends from the Nile to the Canary Islands and from the Mediterranean Sea to Burkina Faso.

Mallal's painting must be considered in relationship to the recent concessions the Moroccan government has made to the Imazighen. In 2001, King Muhammad VI made a speech that marked a turning point in Moroccan discourse and policy: he recognized that the Amazigh language and culture are fundamental components of Moroccan society; he called for the teaching of Tamazight in all Moroccan schools; and he pledged to create a Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) (Errihani

[4] Abdullah Aourik, interview by author, Agadir, Morocco, June 30, 2004.

2007: 241). This royal declaration was the first official recognition of Morocco's Amazigh population and played an important role in enhancing the public visibility of Amazigh issues. Today, the Tifinagh script is used in almost 300 Moroccan primary schools to teach the Amazigh languages and even Arab children are required to learn Tamazight and Tifinagh. Most Amazigh activists, however, prefer the use of Latin script, which is the standard in France, Algeria, Mali and Niger. They claim that the Tifinagh script was purposefully chosen to exoticize the Berber language and make it more difficult to learn. They complain that teachers, many of whom do not know Tamazight themselves, are not qualified to teach the language. Despite these protests, the government has continued its efforts and estimates that Tamazight and Tifinagh will be taught in every Moroccan school by 2010.

Thus, despite apparently major policy revisions by the government, there remains a significant tension between Amazigh activists and the Moroccan state. Many Amazigh political activists refuse to work with IRCAM, stating that it is simply a means for the government to monitor and control the actions of the Imazighen and to dilute their political agendas. Moreover, while Amazigh painters have recently discovered newfound political freedom to express their Amazigh identity in Morocco, self-censorship inhibits the creation of overtly political art. Instead Amazigh artists tend to camouflage their political messages as folklore and create paintings that stress the cultural heritage of the Imazighen in a manner that is nonthreatening and nonaggressive. Amazigh activists/artists such as Mallal may be embracing their newfound freedom to paint Tifinagh letters on their canvases, but they are still cautiously testing the waters of free expression as their Amazigh identity emerges into the space of public discourse for the first time.

While change is taking place in Morocco, acts of tolerance are mixed with detentions and imprisonments. Moroccans are testing the rigidity of the red lines. Many Amazigh political activists, for example, argue for the creation of a secular state, since they associate the monarchy with Arabization, Islamization, and the dissolution of Amazigh identity. Although their demands conflict with the interests of the monarchy, whose power is based on its connection to Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, Amazigh activists and the monarch have formed an alliance against Islamists following the 2003 suicide bombings in Casablanca, which resulted in the arrest, detainment, imprisonment, and torture of many Islamic extremists (Smith and Loudiy 2005: 1086, 1087). This coinciding of interests and has resulted in an unexpected alliance that has resulted in increased social and political freedoms for Amazigh activists/artists, such as Mallal.

Sufism: the public face of Islam

In Morocco, the king traditionally draws his power from his role as leader of the faithful and, as a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, he decides how the Islamic faith is interpreted in Morocco. However, a small HoweIslamist opposition movement disputes the current king's religious legitimacy and is not afraid to use violent techniques to oppose the monarchy (Kalpakian 2008: 120). For example, multiple bomb attacks in Casablanca in 2003 targeting foreign and Moroccan Jewish sites killed 46 people and led the government to combat a potential Islamist threat

that they feared would lead to political violence akin to that of neighboring Algeria. The government passed strict anti-terrorist legislation, and human rights groups estimate that in recent years 2,000 to 3,000 people have been labeled Islamists and jailed under antiterrorism laws (Slyomovics 2005: 193, 194).

While the arrests and secret imprisonments of Islamists may seem to suggest a repetition of the cycle of past government crackdowns on freedom of expression, Morocco has in fact been promoting a public vision of an Islam based on moderation and associated with peace, tolerance, universality, and spirituality. Islamist groups, who accept the religious legitimacy of the monarch, are permitted to participate in Moroccan political life, and many Islamists hold parliamentary seats and support the government (Kalpakian 2008: 129). In 2003, King Mohammed VI appointed Dr. Ahmed Taoufiq, a member of the Moroccan Boutchichiya Sufi brotherhood, to be the new Minister of Religious Affairs, replacing Morocco's longest serving minister who was accused of sympathizing with Saudi Arabian Wahhabism. Unlike Algeria and Tunisia, who viewed Sufism as an impediment of development after colonialism, the Moroccan monarch, who historically relied on Sufi brotherhoods for support, recognized Sufism's importance to Morocco. The appointment of Dr. Taoufiq was intended to show support for Moroccan Sufism as an alternative to religious extremism and Islamic militancy, as membership in a Sufi Brotherhood could provide an alternative vision of Islam to frustrated and alienated young men who might otherwise join radical Islamic groups (Kalpakian 2008: 130). In 2007, the Moroccan city of Fes, considered to be one of Morocco's most important religious centers, hosted its first Festival of Sufi Culture.

Since Sufism has long been an important part of Moroccan history, artists of the Casablanca Group embraced it as an important aspect of their national heritage. Sufism is a mystical form of Islam; Sufis seek to leave the physical earthly body through meditation in order to achieve a spiritual journey to God and experience unity with the Divine. Sufi worship involves repetitive oral chants (called *dhikr)*, and members of the Casablanca group created a type of visual *dhikr* through the representation of graphic patterns inspired by the Arabic script. The use of repetitive two-dimensional patterns is also derived from Islamic prohibitions against figurative representation, as some Muslims interpret an artist's recreation of the human form as a type of blasphemy, as only God can create humans.

One of the Moroccan artists to use Sufism as a reference for artistic production was Mohammed Melehi, a member of the Casablanca Group, who sought to deconstruct Moroccan aesthetic forms, such as jewelry, architectural mosaics, and painted ceramics, down to their basic essence to suggest a commonality between them. His work often includes the repetition of the same basic graphic forms in multiple variations. In Fig. 3, he painted curved lines that are reminiscent of calligraphic script in order to recall the repetition of Arabic phrases in Moroccan Sufi chanting. In addition, he divided the work into three interrelated vertically oriented sections to suggest repetition and the progressive variation of a common theme. On the top of the canvas, Melehi painted a large circle to represent the moon. The blue waves underneath the moon refered to the sky, earth, or water and the bold red, yellow, and orange curved lines at the bottom suggested fire. His canvas represented the universe and all of its elements, as Sufis believe that fire, water, the earth and the moon demonstrate the immanence of God.

Fig. 3 Mohammed Melehi, *Untitled* (date unknown), gloss paint on wood, 80×60 cm

Sufism also permeates every aspect of the work of the young Tetouan-based artist Younès Rahmoun. For Rahmoun, Sufism is a personal transcendental expression that serves as a bridge between the human and the divine. Fascinated by Sufi thought and practice, Younès Rahmoun adopts repetition and meditation as central to his art. In his 2003 multimedia performance entitled "Wahid," Rahmoun sat in the center of a black square of fabric, facing his audience in the direction of Mecca. Dressed in a black gown (*jellaba*) with a hood covering his head and face, he began chanting the word *wahid* (the Arabic word for one) 99 times in reference to the Muslim belief that God has 99 names—each name reflecting the essence and qualities of God.

Rahmoun filmed his performance, directing the camera to focus entirely on his hands moving against the black background of his gown in rhythm with the sound of his voice repeating the word *wahid* 99 times (Fig. 4). Imitating the motions of a person counting the names of God on their fingers in lieu of prayer beads (*sibihat*), Rahmoun touched each finger three times, repeating the action 33 times. Like his live performance, the film lasted exactly 99 s and he produced 99 copies for sale.

Sufi philosophy is apparent in the aesthetics of this video performance. For example, Rahmoun positions his hands symmetrically against the stark backdrop of his black gown to reference the concept of the Divine in Sufi philosophy: God is light, and when the Divine appears, all other things disappear into darkness. The sound of his repeating voice resembles a heartbeat, creating a type of musical poetry that is meditative and hypnotic, suggesting Sufi meditative practices that use rhythm

Fig. 4 Younès Rahmoun, Video still from *Wahid* (2003), photo courtesy of the artist

to escape the mundane prison of time. Rahmoun said that this performance was also inspired by the seated meditation of Zen Buddhism, symbolizing his attempt to create art that is open to and inclusive of the religions and cultures of the world.[5]

Rahmoun's art transforms mundane materials into simple yet wonderfully complex works of art. He told me that his designs are a product of intense meditation. His materials, their colors, their spatial orientation, and their message reinforce his deep faith and his desire to represent the wholeness of the individual fused with the divine. At the 2004 Biennale of Contemporary African Art in Dakar, Senegal, he presented an installation entitled *Intifada* out of white cloth suspended from a wall. Intended as an homage to the Palestinian people and particularly to the children senselessly killed in the conflict without a full understanding of the political situation, the piece consisted of 99 small bags, each of which was made of a 1 m square piece of white fabric the size of Palestinian headscarves (Fig. 5). Arranged 8 ft from the floor, they create a circular form with a concentration of white bundles in the center. The forms were raised from the wall with long strands of white cloth hanging down from each one so that the bundles appear to be floating upwards, representing the voyage from the external world, filled with violence and hatred, to the inner, peaceful, spiritual self. The circular form created by the white bundles resembles the design pattern of Moroccan *zellij* or tilework, where all forms appear to grow from a single unified point, referencing the oneness of God. Rahmoun intends for his art to carry a message of peace and tolerance, calling for a world united across cultures.

[5] Younès Rahmoun, interview by author, Tetouan, Morocco, June 2006.

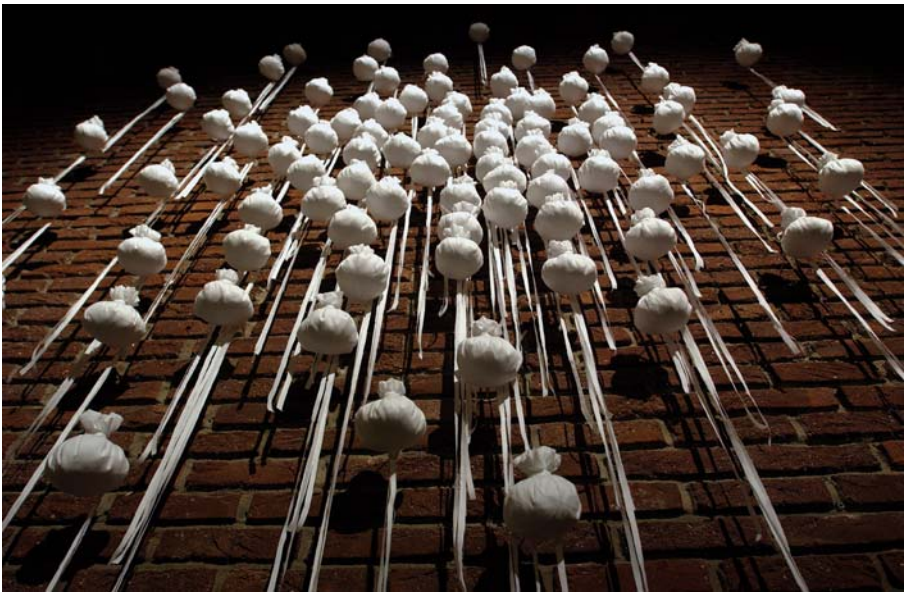

Fig. 5 Younès Rahmoun, *Intifada* (2003), Fabric and nails, 250 cm diameter, Arts Centre De Warande, Turnhout, Belgium, photo courtesy of the artist

Every aspect of Rahmoun's art can be interpreted as an engagement with his Muslim faith. He is a devout Muslim who uses art to transmit the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed. In an interview with the Moroccan curator Abdellah Karroum, Rahmoun stated that the symbolic aspects of his work are tied to his Muslim identity as well as his concept of himself as a citizen of the world (Karroun 2007). Bruce Maddy-Weitzman discusses the resurgence of an Islamist movement in Morocco and writes that:

> In Morocco, as in other authoritarian Arab regimes, Islamist movements have grown in strength in recent years, as they filled the gap left by the absence of democratic political systems in which authorities are accountable to its citizens (2003: 394).

Rahmoun's installations and video work clearly reference his Islamic beliefs more than his predecessors in the Casablanca School who were also influenced by Sufism, such as Melehi, but Rahmoun cannot be considered a religious radical or extremist. His vision of Islam clearly corresponds with the emphasis on Sufism and the message of Islam propagated by the Moroccan monarch—one of universality and understanding across cultures.

Art, politics, and the monarchy

During the reign of Hassan II, thousands of Islamists, Imazighen, Saharawis, and others who dared to criticize the King, his policies in the Sahara, or his role as leader of the faithful, were arrested and kept in secret prisons under inhumane conditions

(Smith and Loudiy 2005: 1081). However, since the reign of King Mohammed VI, a number of journals, magazines, and books have been published that chronicle the fear and oppression of the 1970s and 1980s—called the "years of lead" (Slyomovics 2005: 2). Since 1999, the king has released many political prisoners and human rights groups have been allowed to meet and publish books largely without restrictions (Smith and Loudiy 2005: 1082). Numerous political exiles, such as Abraham Serfaty, and the families of assassinated political leaders, such as the family of Mehdi Ben Barka, have returned to Morocco, indicating that Morocco had indeed turned a new page (Slymovics 2001: 19).

The Moroccan artist Mahi Binebine (b. 1959), who returned to Morocco from a self-imposed exile in 2002, creates art that revisits the massive injustices that occurred during the dark and oppressive "years of lead" and advocates a society free from fear and victimization. Since 1980, Binebine lived in Paris and New York, devoting himself to painting after working as a mathematics teacher for 8 years. Binebine told me that he refused to return until after the death of Hassan II, since he felt he could not live under the repression that characterized the former monarch's rule. It was under the reign of King Hassan II that Binebine's brother Aziz was arrested and imprisoned in the infamous Tazmamart prison for 18 years for his involvement in a failed military coup against King Hassan II in 1971. Of the 56 prisoners taken to Tazmamart, only half survived, and Aziz Binebine's story served as the inspiration for Tahar Ben Jelloun's recent novel about torture and imprisonment, *This Blinding Absence of Light*.[6]

Binebine creates large works that stand between painting and sculpture, creating forms in relief using paper maché coated with wax that are then colored with powdered pigments. His pieces commonly depict solitary silhouettes of human figures cramped in small physical spaces that resemble coffins Rharib-Skounti 2001:26–28. In Fig. 6, he depicted a man in a fetal position, in a small rectangular room, recalling the cramped dark 8×8 ft cells used to confine the prisoners at Tazmamart.

Binebine's figures are anonymous with minimal facial figures, referring to the Moroccan government's practice of taking prisoners without the knowledge of their families. Thousands of people simply disappeared without a trace during the infamous "years of lead," and these nameless faceless figures memorialize them. In another untitled work seen in Fig. 7, he created a male figure whose feet dangle from a brown form resembling a suitcase bound by wire. The figure is suspended in air; this body is confined and completely dehumanized, clearly conveying the pain, horror, and solitude associated with imprisonment.

Binebine also created a series of anonymous mask-like faces that often cover the entire surface of the canvas. In the untitled image in Fig. 8, the pathetic blue face is missing one side of its chin and one eye as if it is a victim of torture and beatings—common to the prisoners of Tazmamart. The figure is positioned as if holding prison bars or a *louha* (a Qur'anic writing board). A novelist whose work typically deals with the fragility of the human condition, Binebine often incorporates into his canvases words randomly drawn from his novels, as he does here where the entire canvas is covered with cursive script. The individual words are illegible; Binebine

[6] Mahi Binebine, interview by author, Marrakech, July 2006.

Fig. 6 Mahi Binebine, *Untitled* (2006), mixed media, 120×80 cm

wrote them messily and crosses many of them out by drawing a horizontal line through them. Hence, he highlights the wordlessness of the prisoners in Tazmamart, whose voices of descent were muted by their secret imprisonment.

Although Binebine's artwork is critical of the reign of Hassan II, his work falls within the acceptable modes of political critique advocated by the new monarch and perhaps inadvertently idealizes Mohammed VI as the King associated with democracy and increased liberalizations. According to Abdelslam M. Maghraoui, King Mohammed VI has "called on a 'new concept of authority' based on fairness, transparency, and the rule of the law" (Maghraoui 2001: 84). Binebine's work is thus aligned with the new king's project to dissociate the current monarchy in the public's eye from Hassan II's authoritarian rule and to establish a more transparent government.

Binebine's work is also aligned with the current government in that it does not challenge the status quo by calling for further political reforms under the new monarch; rather his work mourns the victims of the past. Binebine sees himself as a human rights activist who depicts the horrors of the imprisonment and forced silence that characterized Morocco's "years of lead." He at once recalls the muffled secretive nature of Moroccan prisons and breaks their silence through his art. He honors the

Fig. 7 Mahi Binebine, *Untitled (*2006), mixed media, 122×85 cm

past victims through his use of minimal facial features, his color choices and his technique of outlining his figures so that they protrude slightly from the surface of the canvas to appear as ghostly ephemeral figures returning from the dead, calmly enduring their suffering, recognizing their powerlessness.[7]

Morocco's changing gender roles

During the reign of Hassan II, the status and rights of women were codified under an Islamic *Shari'a*-based Personal Status Law that treated a woman as a minor throughout her life. This law required a woman to obtain the consent of a male patron to marry and the consent of her father or husband to work outside the home or to obtain a passport and freely travel. Polygamy was permitted and divorce was a male prerogative that was difficult for women to initiate. In sum, the legal code relegated women to be submissive to their husbands and his relatives. Men, as the

[7] Mahi Binebine, interview by author, Marrakech, Morocco, July 2006.

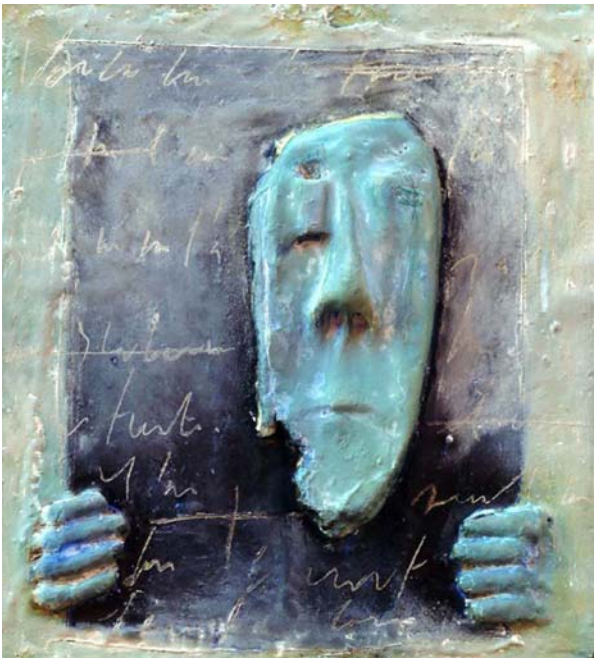

Fig. 8 Mahi Binebine, *Untitled* (2006), Wax and pigments on wood, 40×60 cm

authorities of the family, were legally obliged to provide for them financially (Maddy-Weitzman 2003: 400).

Gender issues were not a concern of the artists in Morocco's Casablanca School as academically trained female artists were rare. Farid Belkahia and other male members of the group received their artistic training in Europe, and although the group's membership did not include women, women's popular arts, such as textiles, ceramics, and tattoos, influenced them. Farid Belkahia, as previously discussed, also rejected his European academic training, desiring to decolonize art to create an artistic style free from colonial influence. Belkahia's leather canvases mimicked the materials used by Morocco's male artisans who worked in the tanneries of Fes and Marrakech, constructing leather bags and stretching skins over drums. However, women's artistic production influenced Belkahia more than anything else.

He decorated his leather canvases with henna, a material intimately connected with women in Morocco who, like women throughout the Maghreb, commonly stain their hands and feet with henna for celebratory occasions (see Fig. 1). In fact, Belkahia told me that his hand-shaped canvas so accurately and meticulously reproduced women's henna designs that Moroccan women were typically shocked that a man, rather than a woman, produced this work.[8] What does it mean for a male artist to emphasize the female decorative form? Is this liberating for women or does it burden them as carriers of tradition? How are women responding to changing roles and rights for women within Morocco?

[8] Farid Belkahia, interview by author, Marrakech, June 6, 2004.

Several female scholars have acknowledged that when women are defined as bearers of tradition, this often leads to their control. For example, Valentine Moghadem writes that:

> For some women the designation of Woman as the carrier of culture and tradition is an onerous burden, one that they would just as soon not assume, especially as it is predicated upon control and conformity. But for other women, it is an honor and a privilege to be elevated to such a lofty and responsible position (Moghadem 1994: 19).

Moghadem articulates the contradiction that exists in the appropriation of women's arts by male artists. These male artists celebrate women's artistic production without recognizing that the association of women with tradition can also be a burden to women, restricting them to particular social roles. In addition, male artists, who display their female-inspired art at galleries and museums tend to profit economically more than female textile weavers, potters, or women who decorate brides with henna.

In contemporary Morocco, women, especially rural women, who support and sustain their families are often limited by education possibilities and poverty. Two-thirds of women are illiterate compared to 41% of Moroccan men. While 56% of the Moroccan population lives in urban areas, this is a relatively recent development. The majority of those who continue to live in rural areas do not have electricity or potable drinking water within 1 km of their dwellings (Maddy-Weitzman 2003: 398). Rural women's manual labor is crucial to the survival of a family, as women fetch firewood for cooking and heating, collect potable water from distant wells, and make items used by the family on a daily basis, such as hand-coiled ceramics and hand-woven carpets.

Rural women also supplement the incomes of their families by weaving carpets to be sold in Morocco's numerous tourist shops, but this has not benefited the women themselves financially. Berber weavers typically live in rural areas and sell their handmade carpets to middlemen who then travel to shops and bazaars in Morocco's urban tourist centers, adding a profit for themselves. The male shop owners then proceed to raise the prices yet again, charging the tourist 100% to 200% more than the weaver actually made.

Given the long tedious hours required to weave a carpet and the lack of profitability, a small number of Moroccan women have left weaving for painting, giving rise to a tradition of illiterate women transforming themselves from weavers to internationally-known artists. Among the successful weavers-turned-painters are Fatna Gborui and Fatima Hassan el Farouj, and, more recently, Fatima Mellal. Fatima Mellal, the youngest of the group, only speaks the Berber language, Tamazight, and, like most women in her remote village of Tamellalt, primarily wove blankets and rugs for her family, occasionally selling woven textiles to other families living in her isolated region. Ten years ago at the age of 30, she turned from textile weaving to painting because she felt that her paintings could reach a broader audience than her woven blankets and carpets. This was indeed the case and the first time she left southern Morocco was in 2002 to travel to Switzerland, where she was invited to exhibit her paintings in a Zurich art gallery.

Fatima Mellal uses bright colors and fills her canvases with traditional designs, such as this painting in Fig. 9 where she depicted objects traditionally associated with Berber

culture: an amber necklace floats near a weaver, a pair fibulae or broaches rest under the weaver at the bottom right. In the center of the canvas, a Berber adobe house typical of those found in southern Morocco floats over a pink rock, referring to the unique rock formations that surround Mellal's rural village. Mellal's mystical landscape conforms to the preconceived notions held by her European and American clients' of the traditional illiterate North African female artist working in a naïve folkloric artistic style.

Perhaps because their paintings fetch higher prices than their carpets ever would, these women's male relatives encourage them to travel to galleries and museums around the world to promote their work, when, in normal circumstances, these women would probably not have the opportunity to travel outside of their rural villages. As a consequence of their travel and associated earnings, the women attain a greater status within the household and more life opportunities outside it. Thus, transforming themselves from anonymous weavers to internationally sought-after artists, women, such as Mellal, contribute to the economies of their families and communities in ways that pragmatically increase their status in both. While Mellal's art emphasizes the folkloric elements of Amazigh culture, her artistic motivation is largely shaped by her political and social convictions. She proudly celebrates Amazigh culture and intentionally pays homage to Amazigh rural life. Unlike the majority of women in rural Morocco who marry at a relatively young age, Mellal has chosen to remain single.

Fig. 9 Fatima Mellal, *Untitled* (2006), acrylic on canvas, 70×60 cm

Despite her success, she continues to live in her natal village with her extended family and has begun to study Arabic and French.

Few academically trained female artists have actively practiced in Morocco until recent years; however, recent changes in the legal status of women are bound to have a profound influence on women's roles in Moroccan society. Prior to his death, Hassan II began a series of reforms that were completed by his son Mohammed VI. After the 2003 bombings in Casablanca by religious extremists startled the nation, Mohammed VI initiated far-reaching reforms to the Islamic *Shari'a*-based Personal Status Law, among the results of which were the restriction of polygamy and the expansion of women's abilities to initiate divorce and to work, travel, and marry without male permission (Maddy-Weitzman 2003: 405).

Despite these significant social changes, some female artists still shy away from the controversial area of gender issues or feel that they are not obliged to confront them. The photographers Yto Barrada and Lamia Naji, for example, have gained international recognition, but the work of these two young women does not speak to issues of gender within Morocco. On the other hand, the Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi, who currently lives in the USA, boldly confronts female oppression within Morocco and beyond.

In her carefully staged photographs Lalla Essaydi creates politically astute and culturally subversive works which allow for the deconstruction of stereotypes and the reworking of oppressive constructs of Moroccan womanhood. She uses the female body to engage with her personal experiences growing up in urban Morocco and to address the complexity of women's roles. In the photograph in Fig. 10,

Fig. 10 Lalla Essaydi, *Silence of Thought* (2003), 76.2×101.6 and 121.9×152.4 cm, C-41 print

Essaydi captured a woman alone in a Moroccan interior, characterized by lavish pillows and a painted woodwork background. The female figure's face, hands, feet and white dress are covered with Arabic calligraphy written with henna—the writing itself praises the owner of the house for its beauty. The photograph, taken the same year as Mohammed VI's reformation of the Personal Status Code, is meant to critique the attitude that women are objects to be owned and controlled by men.[9] While the woman in this photo is clothed, many of Essaydi's photographs from this period feature henna-painted nude women, whose faces are masked by their long hair or turned away from the camera, photographed in the same interior setting. The subject of the photograph and the use of writing critique the association of women with domestic, private space and men with the public domain, a dichotomy commonly used to describe gender roles in North Africa. Essaydi's photograph makes the statement women are socially restricted and expected to occupy quietly their "proper" place within society—an inferior space that is controlled by men (Essaydi 2005: 27). However, Essaydi's photographs must also be understood in relation to issues of class. Underprivileged Moroccan women never had the luxury of confinement, as they supported their families through manual labor done outside the home, and the majority of these women did not wear voluminous white veils, another image common to Essaydi's work, as a long veil would make women's labor difficult if not impossible.

Essaydi's use of calligraphy is also meant to be a statement of female empowerment. Calligraphy is an artistic form typically practiced by men in North Africa and used to decorate architectural spaces, ceramics, and manuscripts. It is also intimately associated with Islam as it is an art form used to represent the sacred scripture of the Qur'an. Hence even when the calligraphy used to adorn an object or a building is illegible, the art form itself inherently carries an association with the divine and the sacred. However, Essaydi subverts the religiosity of calligraphy and its association with men by using henna to write on the women she photographs. In the photograph seen in Fig. 11, she featured a woman, with her back to the camera, actively writing with henna—an act that Essaydi associates with female agency. The other veiled woman sits and stares at the camera, and, unlike voyeuristic Orientalist paintings from the nineteenth century Europe where Arab woman are often portrayed as passive sex slaves, this Moroccan woman is fully aware of her audience.

In a traditional Moroccan context, henna is associated with *baraka*, "divine blessing," and women use it during ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, to guard against danger and impurity. Henna was restricted to rites of passage and Arab brides in urban Morocco commonly sat still for 6 to 8 h as a woman painstakingly applied thin lines of henna to the bride's hands and feet, creating elaborate geometric and floral patterns. However, in recent years, urban women have reclaimed henna as a form of female decoration and have begun to hold secular henna parties where women decorate each other to beautify their bodies and celebrate life (Kapchan 1993). During her photo shoots, Essaydi, who often takes a full day to adorn her models and their settings with henna, tries to recreate the festivity of secular henna

[9] The laws were not ratified until 2004.

Fig. 11 Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #12* (2003), 76.2×101.6 and 121.9×152.4 cm, C-41 print Courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery

parties in contemporary Morocco (Essaydi 2005: 26). While the act of sitting still for many hours in order to produce decorative patterns on the skin is physically confining for women, henna decoration can also be liberating, symbolizing women taking possession of their own bodies and responsibility for their own aesthetic.

In many of her photographs, including her *Women of Morocco Series*, Essaydi evokes the images of the veiled North Africa women that dominated European colonial discourse. Colonizers felt that if North African Muslims could abandon their oppressive practices regarding women, such as veiling, North Africans could advance on the path of civilization and achieve the level of superiority held by the colonizers. In the USA, Essaydi feels confined by Western stereotypes of the exotic veiled harem woman, and, she feels that many of these stereotypes have permeated into Moroccan visual culture and are treated as historically accurate rather than the product of European fantasy. Paradoxically, many Arab women in contemporary Morocco have been pressured to veil by their families to protect them from Western influence. In order to address the difficulties she feels in both worlds, Essaydi began to photograph veiled women against a solid white background filled with henna calligraphy to remove them from a specific Moroccan setting and to metaphorically converge the West, where she currently lives, with that of her homeland of Morocco (Essaydi 2005: 26–27).

While she critiques European and American stereotypes of sexually victimized and secluded Muslim woman, Essaydi also feels that women continue to be

controlled and oppressed in contemporary Morocco. Although the current Moroccan king took a progressive stance on women's rights, many Moroccans, both male and female, opposed these changes, as women are seen as central to maintaining family ties, community solidarity, and in transmitting values across generations. Conservative factions in Morocco used religion to argue for the restriction of women's roles, stating that the King's reforms stood in opposition to authentic traditional Moroccan values and acted in the interests of foreign imperialism (Maddy-Weitzman 2003: 407). In Fig. 12, Essaydi addressed the conflicting attitudes toward gender roles in Morocco. The woman in the right of the photographed composition appears to scold the woman to her left, who is also somewhat younger, capturing Essaydi's sentiment that Moroccan women today are still psychologically confined by social and familial restrictions that limit their life choices (Essaydi 2005: 26–27). Having lived for many years in Saudi Arabia with her husband, she herself was only able to study art after

Fig. 12 Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc # 10* (2007), 76.2×101.6 and 121.9×152.4 cm, C-41 print Courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery

she traveled to the USA to accompany her grown children who had enrolled in colleges in Boston, and has chosen to remain in the USA in order to work as a practicing artist.[10]

While Essaydi's photographs superficially replicated the voyeuristic photographic images taken of veiled North African women during the colonial period, the markings on the subjects' bodies subversively combine the male-only art form of calligraphy with henna to suggest that contemporary Moroccan women exist in-between confinement and self-determination. Essaydi uses her work to negotiate between the colonial version of the past, the limitations experienced by Moroccan women of the present, and her individual aspirations for the future. The henna markings painted on the veiled women can be interpreted as a symbol of modern creative female transgression. In Morocco, Essaydi's photographs are considered somewhat provocative since they often feature unveiled women as odalisques. In 2009, Essaydi exhibited her photographs in Morocco for the first time, but she did not display her earlier photographs of nude women. In fact, she no longer exhibits her nude photographs, and, while this can be interpreted as self-censorship, at the same time Essaydi courageously confronts and tests Morocco's changing gender roles in her own terms.

Conclusion

This article briefly outlines how a new generation of Moroccan artists has moved beyond the aesthetics of the Casablanca group which, up until the 1990s, influenced the majority of Moroccan artists to create art that largely conformed to post-colonial conceptions of Moroccan nationalism based on an Arab-Islamic heritage with the Moroccan monarch, a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, as *amir al mouminin* or Commander of the Faithful. The expansion of liberties and freedom of expression under King Mohammed VI have meant that Amazigh artists, such as Mohammed Mallal, could fill their canvases with images derived from their Amazigh heritage, consciously rejecting any reference to Arabic culture and Islam, in order to further the Amazigh cause without threatening the Moroccan government. Younès Rahmoun represents his deep religious faith within the context of Sufism and carefully crafts installations that speak to the universal messages of peace and tolerance promoted by the Moroccan government. Mahi Binebine critiques the harsh reign of the former Moroccan monarch, Hassan II, and his unjust imprisonment of thousands of Moroccans. While King Mohammed VI has opened public discourse about the atrocities that occurred during the reign of his father, Binebine's work falls within acceptable modes of political critique and does not question the policies of the new king. Fatima Mellal, a self-taught unmarried Amazigh artist living in a rural village in southern Morocco, promotes the right of female self-determination and empowers herself through her work, liberating herself from the tedious monotony of weaving. Lalla Essaydi provocatively addresses contemporary Moroccan debates concerning women's social, political, and legal roles in her photographs.

[10] Lalla Essaydi, interview by author, Boston, 2003.

These artists use their work to expose the political, religious, and social systems of the past and to express their hopes for the future. This new generation of Moroccan artists is beginning to test the role of Islam in the contemporary political climate, to question the authoritarian power of the monarch, to promote the rights of women, and to recognize their country's ethnic and linguistic pluralism. Unlike Mahi Binebine, Younès Rahmoun, and Lalla Essaydi, who exhibit in prominent national and international galleries, Amazigh painters, tend to exhibit in more popular forums. Fatima Mellal has shown her work in Europe and the USA, but she often joins her brother Mohamed Mallal and exhibits in Moroccan Amazigh cultural associations or Moroccan hotels owned by Imazighen sympathetic to the Amazigh movement.[11] Both have been featured on Moroccan television as representatives of the Amazigh culture, and they have become household names in southeastern Morocco. The widespread visibility of their work has contributed to raising the public awareness of the Amazigh cause. Many rural Imazighen were previously ashamed to speak Tamazight in Moroccan cities, and, when they spoke Arabic, were often embarrassed by their Amazigh accents. However, in Morocco's contemporary climate of openness and tolerance for ethnic diversity, the Imazighen are embracing their language and their culture. Throughout the Moroccan countryside, letters and messages written in the Tifinagh script, such as those featured on the canvases of Fatima Mellal and Mohamed Mallal, are now commonly painted on adobe wall façades or on highly perched boulders that can be seen by multitudes of people.

While Moroccan artists have publicly begun to test the boundaries of Moroccan political authority, they recognize that Morocco has a history of uneven political oppression: liberties are often expanded and later quickly restrained. Although civil liberties have increased recently, the monarch could quickly relinquish them. Moroccan citizens and the government fear that Morocco will be weakened by attacks from religious extremists or be divided by ethnic conflict and experience the violence that plagues neighboring Algeria. For the moment, however, artists have begun to question Morocco's history of political injustices and expose the authoritarianism of the past. Sufis, feminists, Amazigh activists and political reformers have used art to push at and to traverse gingerly Morocco's infamous red lines—*shwea bi shwea*, a common Moroccan Arabic expression meaning, "little by little."

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[11] Fatima and her brother spell their family name differently.

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