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**SEEKING AN ETHICAL BALANCE: YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN'S STORIES IN
MOROCCO**

**ALLA RICERCA DI UN EQUILIBRIO ETICO: STORIE DI GIOVANI DONNE
MUSULMANE IN MAROCCO**

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

This thesis emerges from fieldwork conducted during the Erasmus+ Double Degree programme in Fez, Morocco. The aim is to respond to Islamophobic and feminist nationalist narratives about the conditions of Muslim women by giving space to the lived experiences of nine Moroccan girls who share their relationship with religion and Islam. Through semi-structured interviews, it was possible to grasp the complexity of religion and how individuals experience and practise it. The power dynamics in religious narratives are renegotiated and reshaped daily through personal life experiences, creating room for new ethical identities. Nevertheless, the “orthodox” moral norms form the backdrop that, in some experiences more than others, influences and frames the ethical standards the girls uphold. Themes such as love, belonging to a community, and the individual relationship with God highlight the reasoning, tensions, and daily challenges faced by these young women, emphasising the complexity and uniqueness of being young Muslim women in twenty-first-century Morocco.

Keywords: agency, ethics, Islam, Morocco, young Muslim women

ABSTRACT IN ITALIAN

La seguente tesi emerge dalla ricerca sul campo condotta durante il periodo Erasmus+ Double Degree a Fez, in Marocco. L'obiettivo è rispondere alle narrazioni islamofobe e femonazionaliste sulle condizioni delle donne musulmane, lasciando spazio ai vissuti di nove ragazze marocchine che raccontano il loro rapporto con la religione e con l'Islam. Attraverso interviste semi-strutturate, è stato possibile cogliere la complessità della religione e il modo in cui essa viene vissuta e praticata dalle soggettività. Le dinamiche di potere presenti nelle narrazioni religiose vengono quotidianamente rinegoziate e rimodellate in base ai vissuti di vita individuali, lasciando spazio a nuove personalità etiche. Nonostante ciò, le norme morali "ortodosse" costituiscono lo sfondo che, in alcuni vissuti più che in altri, influenza e limita le norme etiche che le ragazze ripropongono. Temi come l'amore, l'appartenenza a una comunità e la relazione individuale con Dio mettono in luce i ragionamenti, le tensioni e le sfide quotidiane che queste ragazze affrontano, evidenziando la complessità e l'unicità dell'essere giovani donne musulmane nel Marocco del ventunesimo secolo.

Parole chiave: agentività, etica, giovani donne musulmane, Islam, Marocco

NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

The language spoken by my interlocutors is *Darija maghrebiya* (the Moroccan Arabic dialect). Since there is no standardised written form of Darija, transliteration can be challenging. Nevertheless, I have chosen to follow the rules suggested by Harrel, Sobelman, and Fox (2004) in their dictionary of Moroccan Arabic. For this reason, the transliterations have been carried out in the following manner:

ص /ṣ/

س /s/

ش /sh/

ق /q/

ع /ʿ/

غ /gh/

ح /ḥ/

ج /j/

خ /kh/

ك /k/

ث /th/

ي /iy/ when it has a consonantal function

ه /h/

ء /ʾ/

And the long vowels:

و /ū/

آ /ā/

ي /ī/

Regarding terms commonly translated into English with different transliterations, I have remained faithful to the original, such as Fez, Casablanca, and *Chikhāt*.

INTRODUCTION

Research Focus

The current Master's thesis arose from several conversations with some Moroccan *drriyāt*¹ (female youth) in Fez and Casablanca. The main topic of our conversations was their religious attitudes, experiences, and ways of believing in and practising Islam. From these discussions emerged several core beliefs that each girl perceived as essential to being a Muslim. Notably, each had her own way of believing in and practising Islam, reflecting the plurality of interpretations of the Islamic *dīn*.²

This research aims to understand, through the main points articulated by the interviewees, their relationship with Islam and its impact on their daily lives. Furthermore, we will explain how dominant institutions such as the family, school, and society exert pressure on individuals' agency and free will. These factors illustrate how girls, in their ongoing pursuit of religious knowledge and education from family and school, continuously negotiate between “orthodox”³/“moral” values and “ethical” (Foucault 2014) principles and rituals, highlighting the complexity of stories and subjective relationships.

Historical overview

¹ The term *drriya* or *bnt* denotes “girl”, specifically referring to young females. In the Moroccan context, and potentially within broader Islamic narratives, the transition to womanhood (*mr'a*) is associated with the loss of virginity, which is frequently symbolised by marriage. This theme was consistently affirmed by all interview participants, and I will discuss it in the analysis section. For other studies on this issue, see Dwyer (1978) and Davis (1983).

² According to Khan (2019), *dīn* “[when] is used for Islam, it [...] means a system of life where Almighty Allah (SWT) is worshipped and obeyed, not just in the narrow religious sense, but in a manner that includes all aspects of human life” (101).

³ Asad (1986b) “states that orthodoxy is not just a body of opinion but rather a relationship of power [...]. Therefore, the task of an anthropology of Islam is to understand the historical production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions” (Lukens-Bull 2016, 50).

The Islamic *dīn* seems to be one of the most widespread monotheistic religions in the World, as well as targeted and debated, especially after the 9/11 attacks in the USA. The ways in which Islam is believed and practised vary among Muslims in the World, as well as along the borders of an Islamic country.⁴ Morocco is a case in which this plurality is particularly evident, thanks to its heterogeneous social and linguistic landscape, shaped by its rich history of encounters.

Indeed, since before the seventh century, when the Imazighen (natives of Bilād al-Maghrib) first encountered the Arabo-Islamic community, Morocco has experienced several encounters through trans-Saharan and Atlantic commerce, as well as with the Andalusian Islamic empire. Followed by the French and Spanish Protectorates, Morocco's history and geographic location have led to a multitude of linguistic and religious groups, making this land unique and controversial. Nevertheless, the third article of the Moroccan Constitution of 2011 establishes Islam as the religion of the State, and the freedom of worship.⁵ Therefore, the heterogeneity of the Moroccan population creates fertile ground for the emergence of a plurality of Islamic interpretations.

Recent socio-economic changes, driven by the widespread adoption of technology at both institutional and personal levels, have resulted in a gradual and substantial transformation. This process was favoured by the gradual transition to a globalised world, accelerated by King Mohammed VI's political choices and, from the bottom up, by the widespread use of social media, which facilitated the rapid circulation of diverse new ideas worldwide.

Similar to Abu-Lughod's (2021) finding that the Bedouin "absorb" socio-economic innovations into existing structures, Morocco's changes reflect adaptation within traditional frameworks. In this global and local context, many

⁴ With an Islamic country, I mean a nation in which the first religion is Islam, and it is officially declared as a Muslim country.

⁵ "*L'Islam est la religion de l'État, qui garantit à tous le libre exercice des cultes*" (Morocco 2011, Constitution article 3 : http://www.sgg.gov.ma/Portals/0/constitution/constitution_2011_Fr.pdf. Accessed January 3, 2026).

contradictions and challenges emerge, as reflected in the tensions that have persisted throughout the country's history up to the present day.

Indeed, during the writing of this thesis (2025), new protests have emerged, led primarily by young people. I refer to the GEN Z 212 movement, which calls on the Moroccan government to address precariousness, low wages, a high rate of informal work with few or no social security guarantees, and high unemployment (Van Der Maesen, 2025). This fits within a global context of high tension and conflict, driven by generations of youth increasingly marginalised and frustrated by an uncertain future.

Methodology

I used a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with nine *drriyāt* from the winter of 2022 to the summer of 2023. Most of the interviews were conducted in *Darija Maghribiya*⁶, with two in English – perhaps chosen spontaneously by the interviewees.

The main selection criteria were: gender,⁷ in particular the choice of feminised and therefore socialised individuals, identified as females and who see themselves as such; social status in relation to their condition as young women, and in particular, the fact that they fall into the aforementioned category of *drriya* (girl).⁸ It is already crucial to note that the distinction between girl and woman is not related to age (Menin 2012), but rather to marriage, a rite of passage that also signifies the transition from girl to woman, not only in relation to social status but

⁶ *Darija Maghribiya*, in Moroccan Arabic, means “Moroccan dialect” and refers to the language spoken by most Moroccans, a mix of Tamazight, Arabic, and some French words. For simplicity, it is common to say just “*Darija*”.

⁷ There are numerous anthropological studies that address the theme of gender as a product of “social and economic processes [that] shape the experience of men and women” (Mattalucci 2012, 11). In particular, it is important to emphasise that, in addition to being “a process that shapes subjectivities and is re-engaged with and at least partially transformed by them” (9); “work, development, nationalisms, social movements, migrations, kinship, [and] religion produce gender and at the same time are produced by it” (11). From the stimulating articles in Mattalucci’s work (2012), it will be possible to identify how gender reproduces relations and power dynamics through systems of symbols and meanings that render them sensible and coherent with reality and imaginaries (Dawney 2011).

⁸ Description spontaneously emerged from most of the girls, especially when they described themselves.

also to the biological change associated with the breaking of the hymen, which will then ensure that a feminised person becomes and remains a woman. We will discuss this in more detail in the section dedicated to the analysis of the interviews.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Fez, with one in Casablanca. Fez is the oldest medina in Morocco and the country's spiritual and cultural⁹ hub. Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and University, built in 859 AD and founded by Fatima al-Fihriya, is the world's oldest university. In contrast, Casablanca is Morocco's largest city and the economic centre where most Moroccans live.¹⁰ Despite this, I met girls from diverse backgrounds, most of whom came from rural towns across various regions, including Fez-Meknès, Oriental Region, Béni Mellal-Khénifra, and Casablanca-Settat.

Due to limitations of tools and time, most of the girls I interviewed are university students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, as well as my course mates. This will therefore be significant for the analysis's results, as the group constitutes a minority within the Moroccan population.¹¹ Nevertheless, I interacted with some girls, friends, and acquaintances unfamiliar with the university setting, mostly from suburban districts of Fez and Casablanca – specifically Zahra and Siham from the former, and Lolita from the latter.

The methodology I adopted was intended to give the girls the freedom to express what was important to them, while also asking general questions, such as “Do you believe in any religion?” and “What does believing in this faith mean to you?”, as well as circumstantial questions based on what emerged from the conversation. In most cases, the interviewees focused on faith and Islam, especially among university fellows and the girls I was less familiar with. Instead, with a couple of girls with whom I had established a deeper relationship and greater familiarity, it was also possible to talk about topics related to intimacy, such as

⁹ Framed as its commonly used meaning of “historical heritage”.

¹⁰ World Population Review, “Morocco Population 2026,” *World Population Review*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/morocco>. Accessed September 27, 2025.

¹¹ For an in-depth research on female education in Morocco, see: Mansouri (2023); Raoui & Ibourk (2025).

sexuality, romantic relationships, and relationships with parents or other family members.

The reasons that prompted me to conduct this specific research are numerous. Firstly, my personal background: I am a Moroccan-Egyptian girl born in Italy. I used to visit my relatives in Casablanca every summer, which allowed me to observe both the differences and similarities between the Italian and Moroccan ways of viewing and experiencing daily life.

Secondly, the issue of religion draws my attention for two reasons: first, my personal struggle with my faith, as I identify as Muslim but do not observe the “orthodox” (Asad 1986b) rituals; second, my political struggle against Islamophobia, femonationalism (Farris 2017) and the widespread “*religiousphobia*” in Italy and most Western countries. These two reasons, along with my general interest in Morocco and Islam, prompted me to seek out someone who, like me, is a young Muslim girl but was born in a Muslim country such as Morocco.

Being a girl and knowing how to speak *Darija*, albeit with some difficulty, has allowed me to connect with young girls with whom I can communicate on more or less a horizontal level. Despite this, I am still a Moroccan girl with the privilege of holding a “red passport”¹² and being born and raised in Europe. Moreover, although most of the girls I interviewed were my university classmates and, at the same time, saw me as a “Moroccan daughter of the diaspora”, I also served as the “interviewer” during the interviews. This can inevitably make the other person feel uncomfortable or, at the very least, “questioned.”

It also reminds us that, as in all social relationships, power dynamics are at play – oscillating between my requests for them to share their experiences, thoughts, values, and ideas, and their willingness to do so; as well as my position as an “European outsider” and their status as native Moroccans – relationships that can resemble the colonial dynamic between Morocco and the West (Said 1978).

¹² Holding a European passport is more than just a bureaucratic requirement; it indicates a privileged position, offering greater international mobility and a lower risk of discrimination.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would have dedicated more time and attention to each girl and conducted slightly more spontaneous interviews, with many more “why?” questions. However, as this was my first experience, I am quite satisfied with the confidence that emerged during the interviews, which enriched me and created some lovely moments of sharing and intimacy with the girls. This experience and these challenges will be useful for future research.

Theoretical framework

Numerous studies indicate that “societies are not compact and monolithic” (Geertz 1993, 42) and, for this reason, it is not possible to speak of a single interpretative current of Islam, but above all, it is not possible to generalise by defining an Islamic society. Rather, it is important to emphasise the presence of a dominant discourse, often propagated by institutions, which tends to monopolise religious rhetoric. In fact, anthropology has often viewed religion as an institutional domain that, alongside family, kinship, politics, economy, and other social spheres, interacts to produce similar social outcomes.

Despite this, across the population, a multitude of interpretations and religious discourses can emerge, sometimes coexisting with the dominant narrative. For this reason, according to several scholars, it is better to speak of “Islams” (Geertz 1968; Eickelman 1982; Mahmood 2005; Marcotte 2010; Abu-Lughod 2016), since it has multiple expressions, manifestations, beliefs, and practices. Geertz (1993) emphasises the importance of “the degree to which religious systems themselves are developed” (124), as they are influenced by the geographical and historical context that defines a given society, thereby determining the level of complexity in the elaboration and articulation of symbols.

Moreover, there is the inevitable “friction that society exerts on the individual”¹³ (Vacchiano 2021, 43), which creates a conflict between the subject’s agency and the pressure of the social system. For this reason, even within small

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own”.

societies, ideological mechanisms aimed at fostering unity may coexist with conflicting currents that drive different viewpoints and opportunities – preventing full conformity to the context.

The reasons are many; among them, the fact that individuals hold different positions relative to institutionalised rules and socially defined prescriptions. The heterogeneity and plurality of values not only concern the presence of a “moral torment”, as Robbins (2004) stated, but are also, and above all, a typical condition of human existence, which can serve as a drive to explore new opportunities (Zigon 2009).

Within this discursive framework, Foucault (2014) highlights the difference between ethics and morality, defining the latter as the set of rules that social institutions seek to enforce on individuals. Meanwhile, the former – seen as a virtue – is connected to the relational form of the inner self and, therefore, to conscious, free introspection by individuals.

Inspired by it, Fassin (2014) and Zigon (2007) identify ethics as “the conscious questioning in the face of dilemmas and moments of crisis that challenge the ordinary”, and morality as “the routine reproduction of common norms [...] or another way of saying *habitus*¹⁴ [...]” (Vacchiano 2021, 44). Therefore, it is possible to analytically divide it into socio-political and psychological spheres, within which power plays a role. In particular, from an ethical standpoint, power is held by individuals who exercise their free will to reason, express emotions, and act.

On the other hand, when we discuss morality, individual power intersects with institutional, social, and external power, extending beyond faith as merely a psychological sphere of “moods and motivations” (Geertz 1993) and involving the relationship between the individual, society, and surrounding institutions (Bordieau 1990; Mattalucci 2003; McGuire 2008; Mahmood 2012; Menin 2012; Foucault 2014; Abu-Lughod 2016). This enables us to recognise power relations

¹⁴ Bourdieu (1990).

and dynamics infused with politics that further deepen the complexity of religion *lato sensu*.

Indeed, societies influenced by capitalism-driven modernisation have become and are becoming increasingly stratified, dispersed, and complex. In this environment, the “ideological and institutional type cohesive processes” that aim to produce “effects of truth” and that form the fabric of every society are becoming increasingly fragile and less effective (Vacchiano 2021). Indeed, it is difficult to find a “collective system [that] is completely compact and coherent, despite the efforts of the institutions overseeing its reproduction to present it as such” (Vacchiano 2021, 42-3).

For these reasons, it is important to adopt an approach to religion in everyday practices, as it allows for an understanding of the meanings that subjectivities ascribe to the world and how these meanings are then translated into daily religious practices (McGuire 2008). This approach will also clarify the power dynamics embedded in the meanings of symbols, along with the contradictions that arise within these meanings – especially during practices and between rational and emotional feelings (Pizza 2004; Mahmood 2005; Mattalucci 2012; Geertz 1993; Abu-Lughod 2016).

Indeed, through rituals, the connection between the surrounding world and the psycho-emotional sphere occurs, passing through the body – one of the major arenas for the expression of power dynamics (Mattalucci 2003; Mahmood 2005; McGuire 2008; Menin 2012). In fact, the body, as a subject of expression, possesses strong spiritual, political, and social power in both its individual and collective forms of engagement. For this reason, it is also important to shed light on the community’s rituals since they also stimulate a strong “social solidarity” – shaping individuals’ moods, their daily life and the social, economic and political structure of a society (Issawi 1950; Ibn Khaldun 1958; Gellner 1961; Abu-Lughod 2016).

Islam has strong principles of communitarian individualism, in which the importance of the *Ummah* is central while the individual’s space is recognised

(Lahbabi 1964). In doing so, believing in and practising Islam means finding a balance between individual and community healing, with rituals expressing this: from making *du'ā'* to praying together in the Mosque. These practices will also be discussed in the part dedicated to interview analysis.

Religion as a symbolic system

According to Geertz (1993), religion is defined as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (90)

Decomposing and analysing each phrase, Geertz begins by defining a symbol as “any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception” (91). As we discussed earlier, symbols are essential cognitive tools for human beings, helping to give order to their daily lives. Furthermore, some behaviours, ideas, desires and beliefs are symbols because of their palpable manifestations, and so symbols may assume different connotations since – like cultural acts – these symbolic forms are social events, known and visible.

In the analytical analysis of symbolic formulation, Geertz argues that it is possible to find the intersection of two kinds of models: models *of* and models *for*. The latter are theoretical schemes through which people organise their physical relationships. On the other hand, models *of* reality are schemes or theories that shape physical relationships in order to make them understandable. The composition of the human mindset is shaped by the interaction between the two models – *for* and *of* reality – made possible by symbolic language (Geertz 1993).

Geertz (1993) suggests that models *for* are a more innate trait, connected to our fundamental need to learn action patterns for survival. He illustrates this with the example of the “model animal in the presence of a learning animal which serves, equally automatically, to call out and stabilise a certain set of responses genetically built in the learning animal” (94).

Instead, models *of* constitute the representation of the aforementioned models, through the use of “linguistic, graphic, mechanical, natural, etc. processes” with the aim of expressing them through different means. Using Geertz’s words, models *of* reality consist of “the manipulation of symbol structures so as to bring them, more or less closely, into parallel with the pre-established nonsymbolic system” (93). The typical human thought, unlike that of other animals, uses symbolic formulation, which makes these two models interchangeable. Abu-Lughod (2016) argues that it is more accurate to refer to “languages” rather than “models” because it is people who create discourses that help them express themselves and also “enable them to feel these experiences” (316).

Geertz (1964a) emphasises the importance of symbols as tangible entities that encompass meanings, values, norms, ideas, and notions that define meaningful actions. Thanks to this, it is possible to unify and connect the heterogeneity of meanings, which, in this way, can converge into a symbolic unity that helps set aside any discordant subjective views. Nevertheless, in his study of the different meanings that Moroccans and Indonesians attribute to the same sacred symbols, a plurality of interpretations of Islam emerges. This heterogeneity may become evident within the same territory (El-Zein 1977; Landry 2010), and it will also be observable in the interviews conducted for this research.

Furthermore, in his studies of Islam, Geertz (1993) argues that religion may also be a “cultural system”. In particular, he starts this argumentation by defining culture¹⁵ as:

[A]n historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (89).

¹⁵ I want to emphasise that the analysis of the term “culture” presented here is solely aimed at creating an analytical discourse to better understand the various interpretations proposed throughout history by anthropologists of religion and other scholars. Following the argumentation that Geertz has developed, including his definition of “culture”, is essential for a clearer understanding of his role in the creation of meaning by human beings.

Thus, from his definition of culture, it is possible to argue that culture itself is a human construction useful – through symbols – for making sense of the world, for finding a way of living in it, and, in particular, for acting and reacting in social interactions. Indeed, culture is shaped by the historical and geographical context that defines the political and social landscape, underscoring its functional role. Therefore, by making this comparison, Geertz (1993) argues that religion serves the same function as culture.

The sacred symbols

Continuing his argument about religion as a cultural system, Geertz (1993) emphasises the importance of religious symbols as a powerful means of meaning. In particular, he states that:

[...] sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (89).

Therefore, in line with this definition, Geertz (1993) focuses on religious practices and beliefs, emphasising that a group's ethos extends beyond morality and seeks logical coherence with the world's cosmic reality. In other words, through the logical construction of a sense of the world, the most coherent way of living is defined so that the ethos is “intellectually reasonable”.

Within intellectual reasonableness, one can perceive what Foucault (2014) finds in ethics, particularly in the reasoning of the faithful that leads them to choose how to be and to believe in specific values, principles, and symbols. I will discuss this argument later. In this, religion plays a crucial role, defining an interpretative logic according to which living in a certain way appears to be the most reasonable and coherent with the world. Therefore, by doing so, a sensible and “emotionally convincing” order is provided through faith in the religious narrative and its sacred symbols, “[...] invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth” (Geertz 1993, 90).

Thus, following this interpretation, we can say that religion, through a set of credences and norms, constitutes symbolic coherence between morality and reality. And *vice versa*, the surrounding world and everyday life give meaning to sacred symbols and religion.

Religion as a narrative¹⁶ of order

Through the ability to operate, capture, and create symbols – such as cultural patterns – humans can set goals, interpret the world, exercise self-control, understand their emotions, and establish a specific sense of order. Labelling practice and belief as “religious” involves viewing them as “symbolic of some transcendent truths” (Geertz 1993, 98).

Geertz found the three most dangerous states of chaos for humans, all concerning the limits of man’s analytical capacities, his power of resistance, and his moral vision. Religions try to provide the means to overcome challenges, in order to render life comprehensible, and to enable us to orient ourselves within it just “by taking thought”. Every religion provides the instruments in order to “take thought” about it.

Using the example of the mysterious toadstool, Geertz (1993) illustrates the attitude through which believers attempt to reveal and explain specific phenomena. That is, he emphasises the human need to find meaning and understand things in various ways, and the ability to comprehend the world appears essential.

For those able to embrace them, and for so long as they are able to embrace them, religious symbols provide a cosmic guarantee not only for their ability to comprehend the world, but also, comprehending it, to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it (104).

The unpredictability, senselessness, and incomprehensibility of certain life events, especially those related to the aforementioned limits, form the basis of

¹⁶“Narrative helps explain the world, but it also helps imagine other possible worlds. Whether it is the recounting of a tale of fiction or an account of lived experience, narrative at once is born out of the imagination and engages the imagination” (Götsch & Palmberger 2022, 9).

“disorder”. More specifically, religion seeks to create order and meaning in the world and specific circumstances through rituals and sacred symbols, thereby explaining the transient nature of these events and feelings. As Geertz (1993) states,

[...] the religious response is the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience (108).

So, we could also say that it functions as a point of reference, a steady pillar in an increasingly uncertain world. Since the unknown often terrifies us, and change and uncertainty can be daunting, religion acts as a light, a firm anchor to prevent us from getting lost, to cling to, providing a sense of stability and rebalancing emotions and feelings. It is possible to rediscover its centrality from both psychological and social perspectives.

Vacchiano (2021) speaks about “registers of moral authority”, referring to “vectors of precepts, ideas, values, models, [and] socially established sentiments” as part of a set of “value assemblies” that can serve as “ethical possibilities [...] capable of being convincing to respond to existential and social pressures (47)”. It thus gives individuals the chance to understand their actions and to steer their behaviours, providing emotional, moral, and cognitive support that people attach meaning to. Consequently, these registers (precepts, ideas, values, models, socially established sentiments) are functional and meaningful for the gestures, thoughts, decisions, and daily actions of individuals, as well as being “available” (Gibson 2014). Therefore, Vacchiano (2021) defines the “registers of authority” as:

[...] narratives that evoke a certain historically influential discursive tradition, which organises meanings, feelings, explanations, and values into a form that appears cohesive and logical, even if interpretable in different ways: religious doctrines (a very common case); models of legal morality (for example, law in a general sense or translocal discourses on individual rights and human rights); established and shared definitions concerning gender; identity narratives, as in the case of nationalism; imaginaries related to romantic love; or other discourses that organise

moral issues around a common narrative (material success, individual self-realisation, witchcraft, capitalism, respect, etc.) (48).

In this regard, Asad (1986b) identifies Islam as a “discursive tradition” that is practised by various actors for “the formation of the moral self, the organisation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of specific knowledge” (Asad 1986b, 10). The coherence of Islam is primarily grounded in ideological assumptions, thereby constituting the “discursive representation” (15) of a specific tradition.

Therefore, the “discursive tradition” that Asad refers to, while serving an explanatory purpose and providing morally significant guidance, cannot be utilised to analyse or describe a “Muslim society” (as in Gellner 1983) or a particular mentality (as in Lewis 1993). This is because it cannot encompass or “summarise within itself all the possibilities of being” (Vacchiano 2021, 48). Consequently, it is inaccurate to interpret the context solely through a single discursive framework.

Landry’s interview (2010) with Saba Mahmood addresses a similar idea regarding norms. She emphasises that norms can have various meanings based on the “discursive configuration” – specifically, a “social configuration” (225) – through which they are articulated. She points out that multiple “discursive formations” can exist simultaneously, allowing norms that may oppose one another to coexist within a single society.

The power dynamics

However, the actors and institutions advocating for religious discourse seek to establish a unified opinion or a broad consensus to enhance their legitimacy and strengthen their power. Therefore, drawing on Foucault’s concept (1980), they seek to establish a “regime of truth”, which refers to the conditions that determine how, when, and by whom the truth can be produced (Lorenzini 2012), thereby gaining greater control and a wider margin of manipulation.

However, individuals act more spontaneously, reformulating these discourses, choosing some codes over others, and making them current through

daily practices. Furthermore, not all subjects are aware of the origins of the values they rely on, even though they are invoked “during the dilemmas of everyday life” (Vacchiano 2021, 49).

[...] Even within each discursive tradition, therefore, there are forces and actors at work – not least those who refer to it – who consciously or unconsciously transform the registers of authority in directions that select or invent particular versions, [...] to adapt them to the effectiveness of other registers. This allows us to see how the registers of authority are simultaneously a source of guidance and a subject of constant manipulation by those who use them, which, in turn, makes them available to others in ways that are not necessarily repetitive (49).

Therefore, authority registers serve both as a guide and as an “object of manipulation”, but they can also be a continuous point of reference and, consequently, be utilised and readjusted to the most coherent discursive tradition with the specific context (geographical, political, historical, economic).

Vacchiano (2021) also emphasises the importance of distinguishing between the “institutional dimension” and the “pragmatic” one, as the former represents the perspective of those who promote the narrative of “moral orthodoxy within a specific discursive tradition”. Meanwhile, the pragmatic concerns what is relevant to the subjects, namely a discursive tradition that takes circumstances into account – not an “absolute” one.

Indeed, in Moroccan society, there are many layers of discursive traditions that, from the “moment in which people renew them through use”, still fall within “modern” discourses, updated by personal experiences shaped by interactions, thereby interweaving tradition and the so-called modernity (Salih 2002; Vacchiano 2021). By analysing socially established values (registers of authority), it is possible to identify the institutions that act as spokespersons for the “collective values of a given society” and that, “in collaboration with those who feel subject to and of the same” (50), shape life practices within that specific social framework.

The power into individuals’ agency

“[T]his moral infrastructure” is also created at the global level and transcends local boundaries, actively constructed and enacted through individuals’ daily actions. The latter should be the starting point for working on the concept of subjectivity, which is:

[...] an unconscious configuration of the ontological weight of the various registers of authority, valid for an individual at a given moment, as well as being constantly reformulated throughout life experiences [and which therefore] defines a certain propensity to combine moral registers in specific arrangements: preferred modes that do not exclude the possibility of reformulation in particular circumstances, where experience leads to learning (Vacchiano 2021, 50).

Therefore, in subjectivity, both the unconscious and conscious levels come into play. The first, as the author states, arranges the truthfulness and the connection with nature and the being of meaningful narratives according to the individual. This state – unaffected by life experiences that shape sensations, emotions, and “moods” – then intersects with conscious composition.

This occurs when, after the aforementioned changes, the individual reflects on and challenges certain narratives or at least manipulates or rephrases them to better align with their own perspective and the surrounding environment. This process may also happen to follow one’s “motivations”;¹⁷ narratives different from those suggested by authoritative sources.

In fact, Mahmood (2009) emphasises that the concept of agency is also “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (Mahmood 2009, 20). Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider Butler’s (2002) work, which highlights how power relations are reproduced even in a person’s

¹⁷ The terms “moods and motivations” are used by Geertz (1993) in defining religion. Indeed, motivations and moods are central to his definition of religion; they are the engines triggered by the stimuli of religious faith. In particular, he identifies motivations as ultimate entities, goals, and aims of specific actions, emotions, or situations. Therefore, they represent the reasons and explanations that drive behaviours in a particular direction. Conversely, moods are states of mind, a set of emotions and sensations experienced during specific moments, actions, or situations, and can therefore be better described in terms of their intensity. Thus, motivations refer to an end, towards something, and are future-oriented, concerning objectives. In contrast, moods are more connected with roots, origins, and present states – the emotions that serve as roots for subsequent states of mind.

conception of themselves, thereby revealing that subjectivity and agency remain subject to a spectrum of dependence on power.

Bourdieu (1990) terms this *habitus*, describing the mental habits that humans use – such as behaviour, thoughts, symbols, values, personal tastes, and relationships – to perpetuate hierarchical power structures inherited from previous generations and learned through socialisation (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992). In this dominant relationship, subordination and resistance to power norms can coexist and, at the same time, constitute the ability to oppose them (Landry 2010). Indeed, the agency can operate within existing power structures by reproducing social norms, thereby “consolidating” specific “regimes of discourse/power.” Simultaneously, it can also facilitate the “destabilization” of these regimes (Butler 1993; Mahmood 2009).

Furthermore, Mahmood (2009) revisits the term “habitus” used by Aristotle, who defined it as “a specific pedagogical process by which moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviour (e.g., bodily acts, social demeanour) with inward dispositions (e.g., emotional states, thoughts, intentions)” (37). Therefore, from this interpretation, it appears that the *habitus*,¹⁸ in relation to the “moral virtues”, includes the acquisition of moral norms through conscious acts, driven by emotions, reflection, and virtuous ritual practices.

From here, the criticism by Mahmood (2005) mentioned above regarding the use of the term “norm” as the only discursive configuration, solely because it is dominant, remains relevant. In fact, as argued earlier and as discussed by Butler (2002), religious discourses can be tools of control and domination and, at the same

¹⁸ When discussing the Aristotelian interpretation of moral formation, Mahmood (2009) references important Islamic thinkers such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Khaldun. In particular, she focuses on the analysis by historian Ira Lapidus regarding the term *malaka* (*habitus* in Latin) used by Ibn Khaldun, defining it as “that inner quality developed as a result of outer practice which makes practice a perfect ability of the soul of the actor” (Lapidus 1984, 54). Mahmood also adds that from the perspective of faith, the historian defines *malaka* as “[...] the acquisition, from the belief of the heart and the resulting actions, of a quality that has complete control over the heart so that it commands the action of the limbs and makes every activity take place in submissiveness to it to the point that all actions, eventually, become subservient to this affirmation of faith. This is the highest degree of faith. It is perfect faith” (Lapidus 1984, 55-56).

time, be manipulated and used as instruments of resilience and resistance (Lewellen 2003).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider what Mahmood (2009) discusses regarding the importance of not dwelling on or confining oneself to a narrative that analyses the scenarios of subjectivities in social contexts in a binary manner, for example, identifying subordination/resistance or tradition/modernity, etc. In doing so, there is a risk of failing to take into account individuals' aspirations, desires, subjective projects, and the meaning people attribute to themselves as rational and agentic subjects. Indeed, "the capacity for agency is entailed not only in acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood 2009, 25).

Within this interpretation, Mahmood (2009) argues that norms can constitute a significant part of the subjective inner life and value system; and therefore not only as a hierarchical social prescription reproduced in a homogeneous and uncritical manner by subjectivities. Consequently, multiple overlapping moral systems are considered valid, and therefore, it is incorrect to see society as the origin of a single shared set of values – often called culture – but it is crucial to interpret social contexts starting "from the dialectic and the conflicting interests of different actors" (Vacchiano 2021, 43-4).

This very dissonance forms the basis for free will, reminding us that it is possible to observe individuals' changes as "molecular transformations" (Gramsci, 1948; Vacchiano, 2021), as they present themselves as "progressive and intimate changes that accompany experience without losing sight of the power relations that underpin and frame it operationally" (Vacchiano 2021, 43; Pizza 2004). In this way, it will be possible to understand the contradictions in the aforementioned power dynamics, as observable in the meanings that individuals attribute to the system of religious "capital"¹⁹ symbols (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992).

¹⁹ Wacquant & Bourdieu (1992) attempt to unify the relationship of power between the subjective and the objective within a cohesive sociological system, identifying culture and society as "capitals" – similar to property and money. Since the religious system is akin to a cultural system (Geertz, 2013), rich in symbols

Factuality through rituals

According to Geertz (1993), the religious perspective is to allow and have faith in wider realities that complete and correct daily human life through “commitment” and “encounter”. Thus, this perspective is based on a sense of “really real” that is constantly produced and intensified by the “symbolic activities of religion,” which provides “the essence of religious action” (112). Furthermore, rituals, in their enactment, reinforce the motivations and attitudes induced by sacred symbols, making them increasingly real and tangible, imbued with additional emotions and “real” experiences.

[T]hough any religious ritual, no matter how apparently automatic or conventional (if it is truly automatic or merely conventional [*sic*] it is not religious), involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world view, it is mainly certain more elaborate and usually more public ones, [...] which shape the spiritual consciousness of a people. (Geertz 1993, 113).

From this statement, the double space within which the ritual can be expressed emerges, as well as the case in which it should be considered religious. In fact, first, it is an intentional action, not “merely conventional”, which is why it inevitably also encompasses the individual sphere of the subject who performs it. According to McGuire (2008), the role of the human body – understood both as the physical body and as the social body – is essential to the concept of spirituality, as it is expressed precisely through the body’s practical actions.

Lived religion is constituted by practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live. [...] Human bodies matter, because those practices – even interior ones, such as contemplation – involve people’s bodies, as well as their minds and spirits (McGuire 2008, 98).

Therefore, it is possible to argue that religious “[p]ractice provides both a means to achieve virtuosity and evidence of it. The relationship between the means and the end is fundamentally linked to the practice itself” (Landry 2010, 226;

of meanings that are historically, geographically, and politically influenced, I would suggest that it is also possible to recognise religion as a capital.

Mahmood 2005). The focus is to emphasise, on the one hand, the complexity in the manifestation of religious subjectivity;²⁰ on the other, to highlights how individuals, through “outward bodily gestures and acts” (Mahmood 2012, 232), expresses their “ethic agency” (Landry 2010, 227), with which they exercise a conscious and real ethical action (Mattalucci 2003; McGuire 2008; Foucault 2014).

In fact, Mahmood (2009), recognising the significance of norms as intrinsically connected to the ethical formation of the self, highlights the plurality of different ethical conceptions regarding virtue. She uses the experience of women in the Egyptian Islamic Pietist movement with whom she conducted her fieldwork as an example and focuses on the relationship between norm and body: the former expressed through modesty; the latter through veiling. She argues that these women, through Islamic practices and forms of bodily expression (represented, for example, by the veil and clothing), shape their interiority and, at the same time, contribute to the development of virtue, which is “both created and expressed” through the practices themselves (Mahmood 2009, 31).

Therefore, for the women interviewed by Mahmood (2009), the veil is not solely a religious ritual practice but also an ethical act of self-formation. For this reason, it can be interpreted as an observance that encourages the development of modesty and shame, thereby dismantling simplistic representations that reduce it to a political, identity, or subordination symbol of Muslim women (Mahmood 2009).

The social power of religious rituals

The dispositions which religious rituals induce thus have their most important impact – from a human point of view – outside the boundaries of the ritual itself as they reflect back to color the individual’s conception of the established world of bare fact (Geertz 1993, 119).

²⁰ In this case Muslim subjectivity.

Thus, religious rituals allow individuals to assign subjective values and meanings to what objectively happens in the surrounding world, shaping how they interpret it. Geertz (1993) distinguishes between religious belief as expressed through rituals and its everyday manifestation, highlighting the oscillation between religion and common sense, as they are “two modes of symbolic formulation” (120). The former interconnects with the latter, meaning that religious rituals shape daily life and are simultaneously shaped by it.

It is this placing of proximate acts in ultimate contexts that makes religion, frequently at least, socially so powerful. It alters, often radically, the whole landscape presented to common sense, alters it in such a way that the moods and motivations induced by religious practice seem themselves supremely practical, the only sensible ones to adopt given the way things “really” are (Geertz 1993, 122).

Thus, religion makes sense of daily life, actions, emotions, and the world by giving them meaning through symbols. It is very difficult to make a general valuation of the moral and functional aspects of religion, since religious systems have a huge impact on both the social and personal systems. Therefore, this allows us to consider religious rituals as transformative acts that produce “real” effects, both social and, most importantly, psychological, for those who practise them. In this way, religion enables the reshaping of everyday reality (common sense), making it compatible with a more authentic order.

Indeed, religious conceptions provide more than a spiritual sense to human beings; they give meaning to “a wide range of experiences [like] intellectual, emotional, [and] moral [ones]” (Geertz 1993, 123). In fact, religion allows us not to take anything for granted, to ascribe meaning even to the most common actions, and to place every element of life within a logical and coherent framework for daily and worldly events. This also allows one to find, within common sense, an individual sense that puts these two psychological and social spheres into dialogue, producing a constant intertwining between them.

Belonging to a community

Regarding the dialogue between the social and individual spheres, the importance of performing the ritual publicly, in the presence of the community of believers, enhances a sense of belonging and shared identity among the people. They are united by the same values, principles, and motivations that are expressed in the moment through rituals, which, by performing these actions, create a unified, cohesive body strong enough to influence believers' moods as well as their "spiritual consciousness" (Geertz 1993).

Talking about the ritual of making music together, McGuire (2008) emphasises how this experience produces a sense of belonging that often manifests as an "intersubjective experience", defining intersubjectivity as:

[...] the apprehension of another's subjective experience, for example emotions, that is not mediated by conscious thought – in which the other or the other's experience is the object of thought (McGuire 2008, 113).

Furthermore, highlighting the importance of the sense of belonging and communal practice that connects the body and spirit of the faithful, she points out how

[c]ommunal religious settings can produce a resonance of several individuals' experiences and thus an even deeper sense of sharing "inner time". [...] Therefore, such intense intersubjective experience and shared time can achieve the harmony needed to constitute healing (McGuire 2008, 113).

The scholar's attempt to show how these material practices express religious spirituality also emphasises the connection between the two through "social and ritual senses" that enable a redefinition of one's understanding of time and space. In his case, the union can occur through singing; within the Islamic community, numerous rituals bring the community and family together.

Indeed, the quintessential ritual is prayer, which must be performed in the mosque, in the company of the community. The moments of sharing prayer intersect physical involvement, but also, and above all, emotional engagement, in which the collective body of the faithful, listening to the recitations of the *imām* (prayer/religious leader), is carried away by the notes of the recitation, sometimes

interrupted by sobs and his tears, which open the space for a ritual that involves the community on an emotional level, into a unique (emotional) body.

In Islam, the sacred day is *Jum‘a* (Friday), which comes from the roots *jm‘*, meaning to gather, assemble, or unite. Community plays a vital role in Islam and is one of its core principles. Indeed, interviewees also see rituals like Ramadan or *‘Īd al-Kbīr* as times to gather with family, stay united, and enjoy the mornings together at the *msalla* with the whole Muslim neighbourhood community.

Ibn Khaldun speaks about “group feeling” (as cited in Gellner 1961), referring to kinship ties linked to the symbol of “blood”, but also to how relationships and coexistence lead to a strong solidarity or, as Issawi (1950) translated it, a “social solidarity” that could also extend to those who did not share the same lineage. For this reason, given the “natural bond based on sentiment” (Abu-Lughod 2016, 53), I believe the same emotional mechanism comes into play when collective religious rituals and symbols appear. In fact, the interviewees show how rituals, whether performed alone or with the community, play a vital role in shaping perceptions of religious faith. Particularly, their emotions, feelings, and moods have emphasised the importance and challenges of belonging to a community.

Thesis Structure

In the first chapter, I provide a historical overview of the advent of Islam in Morocco, its social and political composition, and an analysis of its political and religious evolution. Specifically, I examine the development of different narrative forms of Islam and how they have been manipulated by various actors throughout history. It can be observed that religion has immediately served as a tool for social and political order.

The second part of this work is dedicated to analysing the interviews. In particular, in the second chapter, I analyse, through the recounting of the experiences and thoughts of the interviewed girls, the strong presence and the pressure of moral and ethical prescriptions and limits (understood in a Foucauldian

sense) on the body, as expressed in social and individual judgements. I explore the meanings the girls ascribe to certain religious symbols and rituals to find balance, daily relief, and a broader sense of meaning in the world.

Finally, in the third chapter, I see how they confront the contradictions between morality and ethics, as well as between prescribed norms and their feelings, by engaging in personal research and reading traditional religious sources and narratives, offering subjective interpretations and logics that somehow manage to fit coherently within Islamic discursive traditions, while also reshaping them – thereby expressing their agency.

PART I: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1. A HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF ISLAM IN MOROCCO

1.1. Introduction

The variation in how the Moroccan population interprets Islam has been shaped by numerous historical encounters. One key factor is the reaction of the Imazighen tribes to Arab Muslim incursions in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Another significant influence was the French Protectorate, which affected religious perceptions. Lastly, the wave of Islamic revival occurred from the last years of the twentieth century to the first years of the twenty-first century, during which it both strengthened certain interpretations and led to divergent views – some embraced the Salafi-Wahhabi perspectives from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the East, while others distanced themselves from them.

1.2. Islam in Morocco: history and current situation

1.2.1. The Arrival of Arab-Muslim Forces in Morocco

Before the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, at which European powers established African national borders, Morocco was part of the larger *Bilād al-Maghrib*, which included present-day Algeria, Tunisia, and eastern Libya, particularly Tripolitania (Loimeier 2013). These lands were mainly inhabited by Imazighen tribes, organised into various tribes and federations that often competed for resources. The Fez region was dominated by the Idrīsid dynasty and influenced by the social structure of the Awrāba Imazighen tribe. The western Atlas was governed by several Masmūda tribes, including the Hintata. In the 5th century, following the collapse of the Roman Empire, five major Imazighen groups persisted, each subdivided into numerous small nomadic tribes that migrated in response to resource availability, dynastic conflicts, and tribal wars. This political climate led to the formation of federations and strategic alliances among tribes and dynasties. The Imazighen's resistance to Arab-Muslim armies was strong, and

consequently, Arabs did not conquer *Bilād al-Maghrib* for nearly 55 years (Levtzion 1979). This resistance was partly because Imazighen, practising pre-Christian cults, were not considered *ahl al-kitāb*,²¹ thus making it permissible for Arabs to enslave or kill them.

Out of the 697, many Imazighen gradually converted to Islam, leading the region to become officially Muslim over time. Both leaders and common people adopted Islam, but their conversions appear largely strategic, aimed at gaining higher status. Indeed, in doing so, they achieved emancipation, tax exemption, and the opportunity to join the military and share the war's spoils. Therefore, these conversions were often superficial, and Islamic teachings spread slowly, except in urban centres such as Fez.

The Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from 697 to 909, was the first to govern *Bilād al-Maghrib* and applied a hegemonic political system that discriminated against non-Arab Muslims. The only exception was during the caliphate of 'Umar II Abd al-'Aziz (717 – 720), when he granted equal political rights to all Muslims, including the Imazighen. Unfortunately, his successor abolished this transformative decree and reestablished the previous hierarchy between Arab and non-Arab Muslims.

This change sparked protests and rebellions by the Imazighen, which rapidly spread across *Bilād al-Maghrib* in 739 and 740, leading to the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty's authority. The Imazighen rebellions, known as *fī-sabīl Allāh* (in the path of God), were driven by two rhetorical positions rooted in Islamic theology. The first challenged the legitimacy of the Umayyad Caliphate, citing the absence of descent from the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's family), Banū Hāshim, since the Umayyads descended from Banū Umāyy, who had fought against them. Idrīs ben 'Abdallāh, the founder of the Idrīsīd dynasty, rose to power in 788 near Fez and advanced the descent narrative by claiming lineage from the *ahl al-bayt* through al-Hasan, the first son of 'Alī.

²¹ *Ahl al-kitāb* means literally "the people of the book" and refers to other monotheistic believers, namely the Jews and the Christians (Sabjan & Akhir, 2005).

This narrative remains important today because it effectively legitimises authority by asserting that those related to the *ahl al-bayt* (*qarāba*) are regarded as noble (*sharīf*) and respected within the *Ummah*.²² The status of *shurafā* (plural *ashrāf*) helps create a noble religious elite, often represented in some villages by the Head of the *ashrāf* (*naqīb al-ashrāf*), who embodies both religious and political power. The second discursive form involves “egalitarian theology”, which emphasises faith-based equality over other traits, promoting equality among all Muslims. This perspective is heavily influenced by Khawārij interpretations. Guided by Khārijī envoys, this narrative enables Imazighen rebels to criticise the anti-Islamic policies of the Umayyad rulers and challenge their authority.

It’s important to note how Imazighen manipulated religious discourse by choosing to remain Muslims and using it as a tool against rulers. They specifically used Islamic sources to justify their anger and demands, while also weakening the Umayyad Caliphate’s authority. This pattern, supported by discussions among several political anthropologists, shows how religion can be used for political purposes. In particular, religious beliefs and traditions can serve to reinforce the legitimacy of power (Lewellen 2003).

1.2.2. The consolidation of a regional political Islam

Along Morocco’s Atlantic coast, the Barghawāta federation played an important role as an “alternative” guide to political and dynastic administrative structures. In the late eighth century, Sālih ben Taīf, the son of the federation’s founder, proposed an Imazighen-specific interpretation of the Islamic faith,²³ which the federation later embraced and which can be seen as a way of framing Islam within a more personal Imazighen context. Furthermore, in the late ninth century, they overthrew the Idrisīd dynasty of Fez, establishing control over Western Morocco until the rise of the Almoravid reform movements in the early eleventh century.

²² *Ummah* referring to the whole Muslim community.

²³ For more information regarding the specific differences, read Loimeier (2013).

In the tenth and thirteenth centuries, three major dynastic-tribal federations - the Fātimid, the Almoravids, and the Almohads – aimed to unify the entire *Bilād al-Maghrib* under a single political and religious authority, surpassing regional and tribal specificities. Despite their efforts, achieving this goal was ultimately challenging.

Between 909 and 1049, the Fātimid dynasty held power over *Bilād al-Maghrib* and during their period of authority, two very influential Sunni-Mālikī²⁴ legal texts circulated in North Africa: the *risāla* of the religious scholar Ibn Abīzayd al-Qayrawānī and the *mukhtasar* by Khalīl ben Ishāq, both of which were central to the spread of Mālikī thought in the region.

Beginning in the early twelfth century, the Banū Hilāl Arab tribes migrated from Upper Egypt to the depopled Western Moroccan region of Barghawāta, slowly forming Arab tribal communities there. Meanwhile, from 1055 to 1144, the Almoravid Empire governed *Bilād al-Maghrib* with its capital in Marrākish, and its theoretical guide followed the Sunni-Mālikī law interpreted by the legal experts (*fuqahā*). The continuity of this dominant narrative throughout history led the *Bilād al-Maghrib* to adopt a firmly Sunni-Mālikī stance. Furthermore, over time, the Almoravid articulated a distinct Sanhāja elite identity. Such a differentiation gave rise to the privilege of wearing *lithām*²⁵ for Sanhāja-Almoravids warriors only. This discrimination culminated in resistance and dissent among other Imazighen tribal groups, who were barred from participating in political decision-making.

Another triggering point was the Almoravid legal system, particularly the *fuqahā*'s interpretation of Islamic sources. Consequently, several tribal communities in *Bilād al-Maghrib* developed a movement to oppose both the privileges of the Sanhāja warriors and the juridical system of the Almoravid Empire. This opposition, guided by the Almohad dissidents, began with a rebellion

²⁴ Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) comprises four main schools of thought, each differing in its approach to interpreting *Shari'a* (Qur'an and *Sunna*'s commendations). The Mālikī school is one of these, rooted in the people of Medina and their interpretation of the Qur'an and *Hadith*. For more details, see: Quadri (2007).

²⁵ Specific headgear worn only by members of the Sanhāja elite.

in Marrakīsh in 1130 and culminated in their control of the Almoravid empire from 1144 to 1248.

The core of the Almohad movement's doctrine was *tawhīd* (the unity of God); indeed, the followers of this interpretation are known as *al-muwahhīdūn* – a term also used to refer to the resistance movement – and they do not reject Sunni-Mālikī theology; rather, they extend it beyond its legal interpretation. Consequently, the Almohad rule prioritised doctrinal unity and established a religious police force to ensure proper observance of faith and practices among citizens.

Meanwhile, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, some religious scholars offered an innovative interpretation of Islamic sources, namely, Sufi doctrine. It was first formulated by the scholars Abū Madyan Shu‘ayb and Abū l-Hasan al-Shādhilī, who developed a religious philosophy that combines *tawhīd* and Mālikī *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Furthermore, their principles focus on the spirituality of religion and the invisible reality of Islamic faith, which are expressed in individual belief and devotion. Sufi researchers were called *al-murābitūn*, and their teachings resonated with the populace, earning them considerable popularity.

Thus, this new religious narrative provides a means of delegitimising the Almohad Empire and of rebelling against it. After their defeat, the Imazighen tribes that had triggered the uprising faced several difficulties in jointly governing the entire *Bilād al-Maghrib* through tribal federations, due to intertribal disputes and a succession of plague pandemics beginning in 1347.

Unlike other regions, Morocco was never under the Ottoman Empire, resulting in a unique history marked by four successive ruling dynasties. This made the Moroccan region the only area primarily ruled by tribes (the Mīrīnids in the XIII-XV centuries; the Wattāsids in the XVI century; the Sa‘ids in the XVI-XVII centuries; and the ‘Alawids from the XVIII century until today).

Beginning in 1420, to defend against Portuguese invasions of Sabta (now Ceuta) and gain popular support, the Wattāsids, rulers of the Rīfī tribes, sought religious legitimacy by claiming descent from the Idrīsid dynasty – Morocco's

oldest. This claim was also inspired by the miraculous discovery of Mowlay Idrīs's tomb. Furthermore, Wattāsids increasingly relied on the growing political and social authority of the *a'yān* (urban elites) and the *shurafā'*, who, partly due to their popular support, reinforced urban independence. Specifically, Sufi scholars served as a conduit of political influence in rural areas, while *shurafā'* played similar roles in cities. As a result, the Sufi Sa'dids dynasty, through alliances with local Sufis and tribal chiefs and the *jihād*²⁶ against the Portuguese in Agadir, gained the trust of the periphery. From 1554 onwards, they gradually acquired central authority and the power to govern Morocco until 1659.

During the al-Mansur sultanate (1578-1603), they introduced a significant religious symbol with political implications, namely the *baraka*²⁷ (blessing) as a form of authority. Furthermore, he created a central civil bureaucracy, the Makhzen, which would, over time, come to represent the State apparatus. Nevertheless, the provinces remained largely autonomous, especially in administrative matters, and were managed mainly by the '*Ulamā*' (religious scholars), who also held judicial and religious offices. Whereas *qaḍāh* (muslim judges) represented the government and their authority varied according to circumstances – they could act as local lords or subordinate agents.

²⁶ The term *jihād* is laden with political as well as religious significance, and within the various currents of Islamic thought, it is interpreted differently, attributing more or less importance to the contexts in which it appears in the Qur'an. The definition that seemed most comprehensive to me is that of Bennani-Chraïbi (2021), who defines the term *jihād* as a "noun, derived from *juhd*, meaning a concerted effort to achieve a goal by overcoming a difficulty. In Islamic thought, it has a dual significance: the so-called inner *jihād* refers to the effort made by the community to reform itself in the way of God; the so-called outer *jihād* relates to the community's engagement in armed combat against an 'external' evil and against those who do not recognise God and His Prophet" (17). However, as I mentioned earlier, this term can have multiple meanings depending on the context. For a more in-depth study, see Kepel (2003) and Amoretti (2008).

²⁷ According to Geertz (1968), *baraka* "[...] means blessing, in the sense of divine favour. But spreading out from that nuclear meaning, specifying and delimiting it, it encloses a whole range of linked ideas: material prosperity, physical well-being, bodily satisfaction, completion, luck, plenitude, and, the aspect most stressed by Western writers anxious to force it into a pigeonhole with mana, magical power. In broadest terms, "baraka" [...] is a conception of the mode in which the divine reaches into the world. Implicit, uncriticized, and far from systematic, it too is a "doctrine." More exactly, it is a mode of construing-emotionally, morally, intellectually-human experience, a cultural gloss on life. And though this is a vast and intricate problem, what this construction, this gloss, comes down to, so at least it seems to me, is the proposition (again, of course, wholly tacit) that the sacred appears most directly in the world as an endowment – a talent and a capacity, a special ability – of particular individuals. Rather than electricity, the best (but still not very good) analogue for "baraka" is personal presence, force of character, moral vividness" (44).

As these events showed, the political history of *Bilād al-Maghrib* has been shaped by centre-periphery dynamics. In particular, central authorities, such as *sultān*, *mālik*, or *emīr*, held actual power in *bilād al-makhzan* (where taxation and administrative functions were carried out). Conversely, in *bilād al-sība* (where administrative oversight was comparatively weak), their influence was unstable and subject to negotiation, expanding or contracting with the strength of the ruling dynasty. In this latter region, Sufi scholars emerged as the primary political and religious authorities, and over time, they elevated their status beyond their roles as *imāms* (religious guides) and teachers to include mediation of local conflicts and disputes, thereby becoming essential authorities on legal, social, and political matters. Consequently, throughout the twentieth century, Sufi scholars gained recognition as “multifunctional” leaders across Bilād al-Maghrib, spanning the political, social, and religious domains. Furthermore, thanks to the circulation of merchants, scholars, pilgrims, and teachers, the “model of the *marabout*” also spread to the Sahara, the *Bilād al-Sudān*, and even South Africa.

1.2.3. The ‘Alawite dynasty

The concept of *sharīf* (prophetic descent) served as a crucial symbolic tool for legitimising political authority and social influence, providing a foundation for rulers’ narratives, which the current dynasty, the ‘Alawite family, also uses as legitimation. The latter came to power in 1666, claiming descent from the Banū Hāshim (Prophet Mohammed’s tribe) lineage – as the Sa‘dids had done before them. They based their authority on their *sharīfian* roots, claiming roles as both political and religious leaders, and considering the sultan to be an *imām* and thus an *amīr al-mu‘minīn* (Commander of the Faithful).

Furthermore, the ‘Alawite dynasty used another symbolic tool, the *bay’a* – an allegiance pledge rooted in Qur’anic principles²⁸ – in order to solidify their identity and strengthen their legitimacy. This contract of allegiance involved local

²⁸ *Surat Al-Fatah, Ayat 10 (48:10).*

authorities – such as *shurafā'*, federation leaders, *zāwiyas* (Sufi centres), tribal chiefs, '*ulamā*', merchants, military officials,²⁹ and court bureaucrats – who submitted to and recognised the caliphal authority of the dynasty. This fact is fundamental insofar as it reveals how religious symbols, such as the *bay'a*, first enacted by the inhabitants of Medina in relation to the Prophet Mohammed, were appropriated and manipulated to legitimise what was fundamentally political power. Indeed, "[...] Morocco [...] found its definition [...] in the ruling dynasty (*dawla*) [...], the sultane/imamate was the sole political and religious common denominator within a region, otherwise, strongly fragmented" (De Poli 2013, 3).

1.2.4. The impact of the French Protectorate

In the fifteenth century, the economic power of the 'Alawis expanded through trade with Sudan and Europe. In particular, they exchange commodities such as silk, iron, weapons, and cloth for enslaved people, thereby assuming a central role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Major trade partners for Morocco included France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, and various eastern Mediterranean countries.

Starting in 1856, when Britain encouraged Morocco to implement a trade liberalisation agreement, European traders gradually took control of the means of production. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, coupled with the expansion of railroads and steamships, created a trading network connecting Russia, Austria, America, and Europe, impacting Moroccan exports. As European influence spread across West Africa and came to dominate Saharan and Sudanic trade, economic inequalities within Morocco increased. This situation gave rise to a new bourgeoisie of traders who served as intermediaries between local and European markets. Nevertheless, tribal and religious leaders continued to hold primary authority over trade benefits and organisation.

²⁹ The sultan Mowlay Ismā'il, who reigned from 1672 to 1727, built a professional army of *ḥarāṭīn*, working alongside tribal troops provided by local chiefs. The term "*ḥarāṭīn*" is a complex and contested label used historically in Morocco and Mauritania to refer to "black" people. For an in-depth study: El Hamel (2002).

During this period of economic, political, and social instability, France began occupying Morocco in 1899. The fragmented autonomy of chiefs, religious leaders, and local officials hindered the emergence of a cohesive resistance to the occupation. Concerning central authority, the Sultan was forced to cooperate with the French colonisers, thereby losing his legitimacy. In response, '*ulamā*' began organising as an autonomous force opposing the Sultan's authority, mainly protesting his collaboration with the invaders, as well as fiscal reforms, loans, and European advisors. The alliance between local nobles and '*ulamā*' contributed to the collapse of central authority, leading to the formal establishment of Spanish and French Protectorates in Morocco in 1912. It is also crucial to note the new political role of '*ulamā*' and how this dynamic strengthened the connection between religion and politics.

In summary, local provinces acknowledge the Sultan's authority, yet they retain a high degree of autonomy and frequently rebel, resulting in a fragile power dynamic characterised by a discrepancy between symbolic legitimacy and the central authority's actual control over peripheral regions. As key religious figures, Sufi leaders significantly influence this power dynamic by establishing *zāwiyas*, which serve as centres of local authority. These Sufi brotherhoods functioned as versatile institutions, handling religious rituals, education, legal matters, economic activities, social assistance, and political mediation. Situated at strategic points along the trans-Saharan trade routes, *zāwiyas* received strong grassroots support and functioned as local political hubs with economic, religious, and social roles.

Similar to other ruling dynasties, the 'Alawites aimed to counter Sufi influence by emphasising the Sultan's religious authority (*sharīfian* power). However, without the support of fiscal and military resources (Makhzen), this authority remained mainly symbolic. Sultans actively sought to control Sufi territories, oversee property and concessions, and appoint leaders of *zāwīya*. These efforts show that Islam became a battleground for political rivalry, demonstrating how religion was politicised and sacredness was exploited to justify authority. This

scenario emphasises the varied character of Moroccan Islamic religion and politics, emphasising their polycentric qualities.

1.2.5. After the French Protectorate

During the Protectorate, which began in 1912, Islam's political role was significantly transformed by several key changes. With non-Muslim powers intervening, Morocco's diverse religious discourse shifted its focus toward a shared adversary: non-Muslim Europe. Consequently, Islam emerged as a rallying rhetoric for collective resistance, and the primary actors in this context were the '*ulamas*', who, for the first time, participated in political and public debate. They became politically active by forming political parties such as Istiqlal and through influential figures like Cheikh Allal al-Fassi. Their discourse positioned Islam as the foundation for citizenship (*Ummah*) and introduced the Salafi³⁰ Islamic doctrine into Moroccan religious narrative. The main political and religious goal of Salafists was to return to the Qur'an and *Sunna*, to critique maraboutism and popular Islam, to reaffirm national Islamic identity, and to defend religious authenticity as the nation's foundation. This doctrine's dissemination helped shape Moroccan nationalism as a religion-based ideology and fostered a narrative that criticised the Sultan for failing to defend Islam, citing his submission to colonial powers (Laroui 1977).

In 1915, Hubert Lyautey, the French colonial administrator, nationalised the pious foundations (*hubūs*), which had previously been independent of central power, thereby granting financial independence to local religious groups. This decree (*dahir*) marked the beginning of state control over Islam through administrative structures. Furthermore, in 1930, another significant *dahir* was promulgated, known as the "Berber *dahir*", which separated the legislative administration of Tamazigh speakers from that of Arabic speakers. The former

³⁰ The oldest and most historically rooted Salafists are the conservative pietists, who trace their origins to Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Sunni/Salafi reform movement, spread during the eighteenth century. His thought reached Morocco through the Sultanate of Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah (r. 1757-1790) and Mawlay Sulayman (r. 1792-1822), who favoured the spread of the first Moroccan Salafism.

were judged under French law, while Arabic speakers were under Islamic law (*Shari'a*), establishing a discriminatory precedent that would shape social, political, and economic structures for many years. The colonisers' aim was that of divide and conquer, through which, on the one hand, it was easier for the French to control the Tamazigh speakers, who made up more than two-thirds of the population. On the other hand, to prevent the people from organising themselves collectively against the invaders. Despite this, the *dahir* was one of the triggers of the resistance struggle by Moroccan nationalist movements.

From mid-1940, King Mohammed V, who had been sidelined by colonial authorities, took strategic political steps to build an alliance with nationalists, especially the influential Istiqlal party, led by Al-Fassi. This strategy helped the King regain public influence and created the myth of a martyr sultan who sacrificed himself for his country. Such rhetoric framed the monarchy as a crucial part of Moroccan identity and challenged the delicate balance between the *bilād al-makhzan* and the *bilād al-siba*, thereby introducing the idea of a “national union”. Therefore, French colonisation significantly transformed the diverse religious landscape, paving the way for the monarchy to assert its exclusive authority in the following period.

After independence in 1956, Mohammed V established an autonomous legal domain for the '*ulamā*', allowing Allal al-Fassi to develop the personal code (*Mudawwana*) rooted in the Mālikī school of thought. Since this period, the relationship between politics and religion in Morocco has undergone a significant transformation. The monarchy increasingly sought to assert control over the religious sphere and gradually incorporated the '*ulamā*' into the Makhzen to preempt potential opposition. This is evident in Hassan II's reforms, such as the 1963 Karaouiyine reform³¹ and the 1964 establishment of *Dar al-Ḥadith el-Hassania*,³² which aimed to fragment religious authority and lessen the political

³¹ This reform marked the transition of the independent Qarawiyyin madrasa (Fez) into a university under the control of the state education system (Wainscott 2023).

³² A religious institution of higher learning.

power of the *'ulamā'*. However, these measures triggered a counterreaction as an uncontrollable “mass” of *'ulamā'* emerged, many of whom, despite being self-proclaimed, still held religious legitimacy, making oversight more complicated.

Another point of contention involves how *'ulamā'* engage in politics. They typically did not take part in electoral contests; instead, they influenced politics by lobbying, speaking through the media, issuing *fatwās*³³ or moral advice (*nasīḥa*), and serving as moral mediators. These actions set them apart from institutionalised Islamism, which also seeks to Islamise society but uses different methods.

As previously discussed, the French protectorate brought a major change to Moroccan political tradition. Religious and legal authority was exercised by mediators and officials aligned with the Sultan's political interests, rather than serving the diverse social groups. Indeed, the legal system evolved to reflect direct sovereign authority, aligning with the monarch's ultimate goal of sovereignty rather than representing the community or various pre-existing traditions. In this context, the monopolisation of the normative order becomes clear, moving from socially negotiated norms to politically centralised ones.

During the pre-Protectorate period, the *qāḍī*, acting as a judge, and the *'ulamā'*, as mediators – both adhering to Mālikī Islamic law – had autonomous and flexible roles that reflected local, tribal, and social contexts. However, following the changes that occurred during the Protectorate, the variety of social groups' interests – such as federations, tribes, religious communities, and urban populations – and the capacity of the *'ulamā'* to negotiate roles based on context and serve as mediators between society and authority have disappeared.

1.2.6. The formation of political Islamist groups

In 1969, Morocco saw the emergence of its first political Islamist group, *Al-Shabiba al-Islāmiyya* (Islamist Youth), founded in Casablanca by the nationalist Abdelkarim Mouti. This group was primarily composed of university students

³³ A religious-legal opinion from an Islamic jurisprudence expert addressing lifestyle, *Shari'a* interpretation, and broader religious issues.

seeking to reshape the foundations of political Islam, inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb's thought.³⁴ This attitude motivated them to offer sanitary and educational services to the most vulnerable populations, as well as direct their political position in opposition to Western ideology and Moroccan Marxism because of their laicist stance. Initially, the kingdom tolerated their presence as a counterweight to the rising Moroccan leftists. But after the main leaders were arrested following the assassination of syndicalist Omar Benjelloun in 1975, the group lost its legitimacy and was disbanded.

As a result, in 1983, some members founded new political organisations, including the moderate *Jama'a al-Islamiya* (the Islamic community), founded by Abdelilah Benkirane. This group is based on associative Islamism, promotes reform, and rejects violence. To expand their political influence and reject the notion of an Islamic monopoly in their group's name, they renamed the party *Harakat al-Islah wa-al-Tajdid* (MRR, Movement of Reform and Renewal) and emphasised religious renewal and reform. Following this approach, they allied with the *Al-Haraka Shaabia Doustouriya Dimoqratiya* (CDPM, Constitutional and Democratic Popular Movement) and supported the *Harakat al-Islah wa al-Tajdid* (MUR, Movement of Unity and Renewal).

Finally, in 1998, with Al-Khatib as the party's leader, they adopted the official name *Al-Adala Wat-Tanmiya* (PJD, Party of Justice and Development), which helped them gain more legitimacy and enabled full integration into the Moroccan political system. Nonetheless, to participate in political competition, the PJD had to agree on four principles: recognising the King as *Amir al-mu'miniin* (Commander of the Faithful), accepting the Maliki school of jurisprudence and

³⁴ Qutb was often linked to the ideology of contemporary jihadism; he had no formal religious training but eventually grew closer to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They believed that justice entails personal and inner freedom from social and economic inequalities, especially in the face of a submissive mentality that can enslave individuals. Each person has responsibilities and virtues toward the community and social solidarity, which can lead to equality. Like many other Islamic thinkers, they view social and religious practices as interconnected. He legitimised armed resistance to modern authoritarian Arab governments. For more detailed studies on this issue and other Islamist thoughts, see Darif (1992) and Mazzucotelli (2021).

religion (moderate Sunnism), supporting Moroccan territorial unity, and rejecting violence.

1.2.7. The consolidation of Salafism

On the other side, after independence, Hassan II saw Wahhabism as a useful tool to reinforce his legitimacy and strengthen his authority through authoritarian means. For this reason, he began collaborating with Saudi Arabia, gaining financial backing for his regime and strengthening institutions such as *madāris* (Qur'anic schools, plural of *madrasa*) and social aid groups to spread Wahhabi ideology. Consequently, in 1971, he favoured the construction of a Qur'anic house in Marrakesh, and in 1976, he established a *da'wa* association in which Moroccan Salafists³⁵ were engaged in education.

During the 1980s, Moroccan Salafism was influenced by several international events, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which prompted many Moroccans to participate in *jihād* abroad. For this reason, they witnessed the emergence of more radical political positions aimed at redefining the relationship between society and institutions. They opposed Western economic, political, and social ideologies and rejected any connections with Western countries. Their agenda also involves establishing a legal system grounded in Islamic law (*Shari'a*), and the core of their doctrine is the concept of emulating the Prophet Muhammad's companions (*Ṣaḥāba*), who are regarded as the pious ancestors (*al-salāf al-sāliḥ*).

1.3. The religious and socio-political evolutions from the 90s

The new political and religious landscape not only weakened the power of the local '*ulamā*' by establishing *madrassas* and a group of religious "Pietists"³⁶,

³⁵ They were intertwined with the nationalist mobilisation during the Moroccan independence struggle, alongside the traditional '*ulamā*' and were directed by notable figures such as Allal al-Fassi and Taqi al-Din al-Hilali.

³⁶ Pietist Salafism is a branch of Islamic Salafism that adheres to Islamic rules and emphasises the behaviour of the *saḥāba*. The Pietists prioritise personal religious practice over political influence and oppose violence.

but also subtly sought to undermine the PJD and *al-‘Adl wa al-Ihsān* movements. These developments gradually enabled the spread of Salafism and created an environment conducive to radicalisation, catching both the King and the Makhzen by surprise. As international religious influences increased, returning *mujahidīn* from conflicts in Algeria, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Chechnya, along with the global exchange of jihadist ideas via CDs, websites, and conflict videos, Moroccan Salafism experienced a slow yet notable shift toward radicalisation.

1.3.1. The radicalisation of Moroccan Salafism

As a result, from the 1990s onward, small radical groups emerged in some suburban mosques in Casablanca, Tanger, and Fez. These groups, called “takfirist”³⁷, were mostly made up of poor, illiterate, and marginalised youth who followed leaders such as Omar Haddouchi and Mohammed Fizazi. They were connected to transnational jihadists recruiting for external conflicts, but operated mainly within Morocco. Their political aim centred on individual *jihād* to purify society, without pursuing any national political objectives.

After Mohammed VI came to power in 1999, the monarchy moved away from his father’s Wahhabist approach to destabilise growing radical groups and secure support from the United States, especially after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Nevertheless, on May 16th, 2003, Casablanca experienced its first jihadist kamikaze attack, resulting in forty-five deaths and one hundred injuries, mostly Moroccans. The attackers numbered twelve young men, who were detained for nearly 30 years and the ideological influence is often attributed to leaders like Fezazi. However, many scholars associate socio-economic issues such as poverty and illiteracy with increased radicalisation tendencies. Indeed, the subsequent attacks on March 11th, 2007, in Casablanca, and on April 28th, 2011, at Marrakesh’s *Jemā el-Fnā* square,³⁸ were carried out by young marginalised

³⁷ Local Takfirists were small groups living in the suburbs, composed mainly of illiterate youth who had broken with their families and society. Their goals were to purify society and punish evil through violence (Tozy 2009).

³⁸ For in-depth research, read Botha (2008).

Moroccan men, reflecting the impact of social and economic factors. Although both of these attacks resulted in fewer victims than the 2003 one, these events, starting with the latter, significantly altered national security strategies and caused notable social divisions.

1.3.2. The socio-political and religious consequences

On 29 May 2003, the monarchy enacted Law 03.03 in a special session to strengthen the national security strategy. The law encompasses various aspects, including the security forces, legislative changes, social programs, and religious reforms, which form the foundation of the current anti-terrorism policy. It revised the Penal Code to define terrorism as acts aimed at severely disrupting public order, but the vague language allows broad interpretation, leading to the enforcement of discretionary, expanded charges beyond terrorism. Punishments were heightened, and police powers were expanded to include preventive detention, searches, interceptions, and banking controls, even for suspected individuals (Gentili 2018).

During this period, Morocco witnessed a significant shift towards securitisation, a trend also flagged by Amnesty International, which accused the authorities of torture and human rights abuses. The Makhzen responded on 14 February 2006 by promulgating Law 43.04, which introduced the crime of torture, even as violations continued. Thus, the law enacted on 3 March has reinforced the security-focused central State, subordinating procedural guarantees to preventive measures and increasing the discretion of security agencies. This creates tension between upholding fundamental rights, managing Islamism politically, and ensuring national security (Wainscott 2015).

This analysis also highlights a significant change in the relationship between the State and Islamism after the legislative changes of 2003, as it involves a redefinition of religious authority, prompting the regime to intensify control over official Islam. There is also a distinct separation between “legitimate” Islam and “radical” or “deviant” Islam. In addition to repression, reforms in *imām* training

have been implemented, mosque supervision has been increased,³⁹ and social aid programmes have been launched. The aim is to prevent radicalisation, control areas where Salafi preachers might operate, and re-establish the legitimacy of the central religious authority (El-Katiri 2013).

Furthermore, a training programme was also introduced for female religious guides, namely the *murshidāt*, to promote moderate interpretations of the Qur'an. Since women have significant influence within the household and educational spheres, they could play an important role in dissuading potential extremist tendencies, particularly among their children, husbands, partners, or fathers (Sheline 2018). The *murshidāt* are not only expert religious guides but also active citizens in direct contact with the community, working in NGOs or hospitals to disseminate a religious narrative consistent with the Makhzen's interpretative lines (Sheline 2018; Vandermeulen 2024). This choice, although part of a broader strategic framework of bureaucratisation of religion, revolutionised and conferred greater authority upon women, also establishing the reference model of Muslim femininity.

The attacks that occurred between 2003 and 2011 were perpetrated by many young people from urban slums connected to jihadist Salafist groups. This suggests that socio-economic inequalities and marginalisation played a role in fueling extremism and vulnerability to violence. In response, Mohammed VI launched the National Human Development Initiative in 2005 to reduce poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion, improve living conditions for the vulnerable, and prevent extremism. By 2004, adult illiteracy was about 50%, and around 20% of the population lived below the poverty line. Furthermore, in 2004, Mohammed VI introduced the "Ville Sans Bidonville" housing initiative, aiming to upgrade or eliminate most informal urban settlements by 2010. This reform aims to build more affordable homes, expand social assistance programs, and support private-sector involvement in construction (Bergh 2012). The kingdom's efforts (with assistance

³⁹ Aimed at fostering a "national" Islam aligned with the monarchy and promoting symbolic discipline.

from World Bank loans) to address both urban and rural areas made some progress, but a considerable gap between infrastructure investments and the development of essential services such as healthcare and education remained (Hibou 2006, 2011).

From a religious perspective, Mohammed VI, seeking to counteract the spread of radical ideologies like Wahhabism and Salafism, stresses the importance of preserving and strengthening the Mālikī interpretation of Islam – recognised for its moderation and tolerance. In 2004, to achieve this, he empowered the Supreme Council of ‘*Ulamā*’,⁴⁰ issuing a decree granting the Council exclusive authority over religious issues and making it the only body permitted to issue *fatāwā* (legal opinions based on Islamic Law, plural of *fatwā*), consolidating this authority in Article 41 of the 2011 Constitution. The Council operates under the King’s leadership, strengthening centralised religious authority and the application of Islamic law, thereby preserving the Mālikī doctrine (El-Katiri 2013). Indeed, the King, as a *sharīf* (descendant of the Prophet), continues to hold the title of *amīr al-mu‘minīn*, which confers on him supreme authority over religious interpretation and legitimacy (Tozy 1999; De Poli 2013). In 2006, another reform was enacted to modify the religious education system by standardising teaching, increasing the professionalisation of scholars, and promoting moderate Mālikī Islam (Wainscott 2023).

Another key initiative was to integrate all mosques under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs’ control, thereby eliminating unauthorised preachers and strengthening sanctions against non-compliant mosques. Furthermore, a further policy to support the moderate interpretation of Islam was the creation, in 2015, of the Mohammed VI Institute, which trains African *a‘imma* (plural of *imām*) from countries such as Mali, France, Chad, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Tunisia,

⁴⁰ In 1979, Abdellah Guennoun, the general secretary of the League of ‘*Ulamā*’, delivered a significant speech at the VII conference of the League and wrote an article that subtly criticised the monarchy. Drawing inspiration from the Iranian Revolution, he challenged the legitimacy of Muslim regimes aligned with Western interests, condemning their imitation of Western nations. He also highlighted the global divide between oppressors and the oppressed (*mustad‘afūn*), comparing the oppressors to corrupt leaders and chiefs influenced by Western powers. In this context, Hassan II established the Supreme Council of ‘*Ulema*’ in 1981, as part of his political strategy of religious nationalisation and to oppose the expansion of Shia Islam driven by the Iranian Revolution (Tozy 1999; Wainscott 2023).

promoting an educated and moderate religious dialogue within an academic environment that remains under the State's control (Wainscott 2023).

In this scenario, the PJD gradually became recognised as the main representative voice in parliament, while on the other side, radical Salafists were labelled as a threat to national security, creating a strong polarisation in political and religious discourse. Actually, since the 2002 parliamentary elections, the PJD has enjoyed strong popular support. They secured a majority of seats and the mandate to form a new government in 2011, and they won again in 2016 until their defeat in the 2021 elections.⁴¹ Their political platform is primarily based on defending traditional moral values.

Consequently, the Moroccan King, in his current form, holds judicial, executive, and legislative powers, serving as the guardian of the norm and the final authority on matters of law, generating and interpreting the law, and centralising all authority in himself (Hammoudi 1997; Ferrié and Dupret 2011; Madani, Maghraoui, and Zerhouni 2012). As Tozy (1999) and other scholars emphasise, this situation was neither Islamically required nor historically customary; rather, it resulted from modern state formation, colonial influences, and the politicisation of religion.

1.3.3. Mudawwana 2004 Reform

The Family Law (*Mudawwana*) dates back to 1958, when the first Personal Code after Independence was promulgated. It followed a conservative interpretation of Maliki Law and thus contained several inequalities between women's and men's personal rights. Indeed, the *Mudawwana* reform of 2004 aims

⁴¹ In the September 2021 elections, the data show that the party lost more than half of its voters for various reasons, including a lack of consistency with the party's principles, even after the change of leader, who has been Abdelilah Benkirane since 2016. The elections were won by the current ruling party, the National Rally of Independents (NRI), mainly composed of politicians representing the state and businessmen, among whom is the leader, Aziz Akhannouch – who is also one of the richest in the country. These elections marked a turning point in the Moroccan political and economic system, heavily influenced by the context, such as Covid-19 and strong social media influence (Douhan, Landucci, & Richter, 2022). Nonetheless, the influence of political Islam remains embedded in the social fabric thanks to the extra-institutional actions of the Islamist group *Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan* (Kayyali, 2021).

to provide more rights to women and to undermine gender hierarchy, a matter pressed by Moroccan feminist associations and socio-political events – such as the suicide attacks in Casablanca in 2003 (Salime 2007). As a result, it introduced significant changes that improved Moroccan women's and children's rights, particularly regarding marriage, divorce, custody, and polygamy.

Firstly, the age of marriage for women was raised from 15 to 18, and the matrimonial guardian, or *wali*, became optional, allowing women to sign their own marriage contract. Furthermore, judges are required to provide a formal justification in cases of marriage under 18 years old. Secondly, the divorce should be prevented through a tentative reconciliation with the aid of a judge and family members, since the *Hadith* discourages it. Nevertheless, it is affordable, with the agreement of both the wife and the husband, and they must take the children's well-being into account. In fact, after the divorce, the children's father has to support it financially, giving compensation to the mother. Furthermore, in case of abuse or any kind of violence, women can divorce without any justification. Thirdly, before this reform, the girl, regardless of her age, was under the guardianship of her father and, after marriage, of her husband. This meant she had no legal autonomy or personal will, as it was up to them to serve and choose her interests. With the reform and a different interpretation of the Qur'an, this condition changed because it became mandatory to obtain the girl's consent to marry and to whom she would marry. Finally, the man's polygamy became affordable only in rare specific needs, but it was consented to only after a confrontation with a judge and the consent of the first wife (Ennaji 2010; Charrad 2012).

This reform was an effort to interweave Islamic Law and international personal rights. However, the implementation of the law depends on socio-economic conditions, the interpretation of Islam, and the judicial system – and, in particular, on judges. The latter make the law effective through their verdicts in individual cases, since patriarchal norms and the old *Mudawwana* influence the

judges of the older generation, who were trained under the previous legislation (Slaoui 2015).

The socio-economic aspects are relevant because families with low incomes tend to resort to early marriage (mainly for daughters) to ensure the daughter's safety and the family's reputation, thereby reproducing the previous social order linked to the guardianship of the girl (Dwyer 1978; Davis 1983). This is mainly practised by large nuclear families that do not have enough resources to ensure their children's good quality of life. These characteristics are typical of rural and suburban families – the latter are mostly migrants from the countryside – who are the most illiterate and marginalised (Raoui and Ibourk 2025).

Misinterpretations of religious texts are frequently shaped by a misogynistic perspective on Islam, which serves to legitimise a patriarchal political hierarchy often unfaithful to true principles. These authorities spread narratives lacking genuine faithfulness, primarily for political gain (Rddad 2018). Topics like polygamy, guardianship, and inheritance are heavily influenced by such a view of Islam. Therefore, education plays a crucial role in advancing women's rights and raising awareness among women, men, and families about the major reforms introduced in 2004.⁴²

1.3.4. Tarbiya Islamyya (Islamic Education)

The study of religion has always been a fundamental component of the Moroccan educational system and has undergone several changes over the years. Before the French Protectorate, Islamic Education lacked a formalised curriculum, and children learned the Qur'an in mosques or in *zawāyā* (Sufi confraternities) (Eickelman 1976). During the protectorate (1912 – 1956), significant reforms were enacted, such as the Berber *dahir* of 1930 and the restructuring of the universities-mosques of al-Qarawiyyin and Yusufiya, which reduced the traditional role of these institutions in Islamic education (Laroui 1977; El Ayadi 2004). Following

⁴² For a more in-depth research on this issue: Buskens (2003).

independence in 1956, subjects in public schools were taught in French, and the Islamic religion was the only subject taught in Arabic, emphasising the memorisation of the Qur'an and religious rituals (El Ayadi 2004; Ennaji 2005).

In the 1970s, King Hassan II made religion compulsory and increased its instructional hours at all levels of public education, from primary through secondary school, with the aim of religious socialisation. At the same time, between 1979 and 1980, departments of Islamic studies were also established at universities, thereby promoting a religious narrative in schools that was often presented as an absolute truth. After the 2003 Casablanca attacks and the extensive reforms carried out by Mohammed VI, school and university curricula on religion were revised to focus on human rights and values, as well as on memorising certain verses of the Qur'an (El Ayadi 2004).

Reforms continued in 2016, maintaining a balance between security, politics, and religion. In this context, Islam is not treated merely as an object of confessional teaching but as an all-encompassing, contemporary doctrine intended to regulate various aspects of social life, from the family to the economy, from power to knowledge, and to engage with contemporary ideologies. The school's religious discourse adopts a dichotomous logic that places Islam in a position of superiority over other religions and doctrines, constructing a "binary intellectual schema" centred on a positive and a negative pole, applicable to all fields where Islam is presented as an idealised model (El Ayadi 2004).

This discourse's structure draws on selected Qur'anic verses and *ḥadith* fragments, entirely detached from their *asbāb al-nuzūl* (original contexts), and weaves them into an intertextual fabric that also features writings by contemporary Islamic thinkers. Consequently, the school manual serves as a domain where the core text intersects with other metadiscourses, creating the impression of a unified, self-contained discourse.

Using scriptural texts alongside the institutional language of school discourse often masks the ideological aspect: students see the content as an expression of religion rather than as a means to promote particular Islamist viewpoints. In fact,

through memorisation, repetition, and pedagogical discipline, religious discourse in schools leads students to identify with and internalise an understanding of Islam as a distinct and comprehensive system, which, rather than coexisting, comes into conflict with other doctrines (Rddad 2018). Moreover, this methodology went beyond teaching Islam as doctrine and sought to involve both private and collective life, standardising the population under a single, overarching vision of Islam capable of resisting even the “Western cultural invasion” (El Ayadi 2004).

1.3.5. The reform of Tarbiyya Islamiyya’s textbooks

The Moroccan government’s reform of Islamic education, implemented in February 2016, made Islamic studies mandatory for all students aged 6 to 18. This reform was part of a wide range of measures that followed the 2003 terrorist attacks, which shook the Moroccan political, religious and social balance. Indeed, this last reform, in particular, was implemented in response to widespread public discussions about the need to transmit a moderate understanding of Islam (Tozy 1999; El-Katiri 2013; Wainscott 2015).

The most significant change was revising the school’s textbook to make its content less rigid and more inclusive, thereby avoiding accusations of affiliation with radical interpretations of Islamic education. The implementation of this reform was effective in the 2016/2017 academic year, during which the entire set of textbooks was revised (Boustany 2017).

1.3.6. The other side of the coin

The spread and development of technologies have increased access to diverse ideas, religious interpretations, alternative doctrines, transnational theological debates and online predictions. These have challenged the previously held monopoly on religious interpretation by institutions such as schools, the Makhzen’s ‘*ulamā*’, official mosques, and the state’s religious discourse, deterritorialising religious authority further. Another key point was the impact of the increasingly large Moroccan diaspora, which offers a diverse range of Islamic

interpretations. In particular, they might propose alternative religious practices and create a hybrid space that blends Islam with religious plurality and secularism through new forms of piety, evolving discourses on identity, and innovative interpretations of Islam (Salih 2002; Ibahrine 2007; Zaid et al 2022). Furthermore, these phenomena lead to a new form of religious socialisation, one centred on individual choice, even though it is still shaped by the broader social context. Specifically, this can be seen as an affirmation of a personalised, flexible, and reversible religiosity (McGuire 2008; Schielke 2009).

Tozy (2009) argued that the perceived decline in the vertical transmission of religion through institutions such as the family, mosques, and brotherhoods means individuals no longer inherit a fixed religion. Instead, they can choose among doctrinal, ethical, and ritual elements, combining them to suit their personal needs. According to some scholars (Tozy 2009; Hashas 2024), these significant changes in the educational system, as well as in the social, religious, and political structures, could lead to two paths that may sometimes intertwine. The first envisions the secularisation of Morocco, in which religious practices become increasingly personal and private, losing their communal and political significance. Within this framework, spirituality might shift into a purely personal experience, detached from social and governmental structures. The second pathway involves the rise of reformist movements that could lead to a redefinition or reorganisation of the religious landscape (Hashas 2024). Nevertheless, the Moroccan context shows that, for the most part, the two pathways intertwine, as evidenced by successive historical events and this research.

1.3.7. The 2011 revolts

In 2010, the Middle East and North Africa regions experienced the rise of the so-called “Arab Spring”,⁴³ a series of anti-government protests that spread across

⁴³ I use the term “Arab Spring” in inverted commas because of the weakness and ambiguity of such a term. Western media and politicians used this metaphor to label the protests that began in 2010 and continued throughout 2011, witnessed in several countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and some Saharan nations. The overgeneralisation of the term “Arab” and the metaphor “Spring” allude to the legitimization of

many Arabophone countries. It initially started in Tunisia after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid. A wave of protests and armed uprisings then spread throughout the country in response to corruption, economic stagnation, high unemployment, food inflation, poor living conditions, and the absence of basic rights, including freedom of speech (Hibou 2011).

Following its significant influence on Tunisian society, the movement spread to other countries in the MENA region, where numerous uprisings and social unrest occurred, including riots, civil wars, and insurgencies. Several demonstrations took place in Morocco, Iraq, Djibouti, Mauritania, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia. The results of the "Arab Spring" sparked protests in Morocco, and the fall of the two regimes in Tunisia and Egypt broke down the walls of fear that had paralysed youth activists until that moment.⁴⁴ As a result, several calls for protest appeared on social media, urging Moroccans to join the march on 20 February 2011, which became the movement's name (Slaoui 2014).

The discontent stemmed from social, political, and economic problems that had been ongoing for years, including high levels of systemic corruption, elevated youth unemployment, a wide gap between the rich and the poor, and a lack of robust social infrastructure, such as healthcare and education. Additionally, in peripheral and rural areas, there were difficulties accessing electricity and water, along with a high illiteracy rate, accompanied by systematic discrimination against the Imazighen (mostly residing in rural areas) (Hibou 2011; Bennani-Chraïbi 2019).

What followed was the promulgation of a constitutional reform that expanded rights for Moroccan women and men (Art. 19)⁴⁵ and formalised the social inclusion of the Imazighen through the officialisation of the Imazighen

power aligned with the dominant ideology, namely democracy. Thus, it is a label constructed from a Western perspective, which often views the East as an educator (Ventura 2017).

⁴⁴ Between 1961 and 1991, the Kingdom of Morocco, under King Hassan II, experienced *sanawāt al-rasās* (the years of bullets), a period marked by intense repression of political opposition, which spread great fear throughout Moroccan society. For a more in-depth study, read: Menin (2016).

⁴⁵ Royaume du Maroc, Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement. *La Constitution*, Edition 2011.

language alongside – and after – the Arabic language (Art. 5).⁴⁶ The New Constitution received more than 95% of the votes from Moroccan electors in the popular referendum in July 2011 (Madani, Maghraoui, and Zerhouni 2012).

Several scholars (Ferrié and Dupret 2011; Bennani-Chraïbi 2021), however, demonstrate that these reforms began as early as the 1990s⁴⁷ to preserve the real legitimacy that had been undermined by the serious human rights violations committed during Hassan II's reign. Indeed, in 1990, the Consultative Council for Human Rights and the National Council for Youth and the Future were established, and in 1993, the Ministry of Human Rights was established. These political manoeuvres laid a solid foundation for the constitutional reform of 2011 (Hibou 2006).

Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, the 2011 protests in Morocco did not question the king's person but were mainly aimed at social reforms deemed necessary following the 20 February Movement protests. In fact, they accelerated a political reorganisation that had been underway for years, allowing the kingdom to maintain its legitimacy and power while acting strategically through legitimate, democratic political tools (Bennani-Chraïbi 2021).

The 2011 Constitution provides for the separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, but it also defines each branch's sphere of influence, without permanently separating them. In fact, it entrusts the head of government (elected by the people) with a broad range of powers, but also establishes a relationship of interdependence with Parliament, with which ongoing dialogue on policy measures is necessary. Despite this, political influence and final decision-making authority remain in the hands of the sovereign, the king (Fierrié & Dupret 2011).

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ In 1999, King Hassan II established the Mohammed V Foundation for Solidarity, and in 2005, his son Mohammed VI launched the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH). He also acted in the social sphere, particularly addressing territorial inequalities, infrastructural development, and, ultimately, in 2001, recognising the Imazighen identity through the establishment of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) (Hibou 2006).

Finally, it granted significant independence to the judicial system, emphasising the importance of the law as the “expression of the will of the Nation” (Art. 6)⁴⁸ and establishing the Constitutional Court. Despite the decentralisation of power, the king remains full of powers as a “symbol of the unity of the nation [...] the supreme arbiter between the institutions” (Art. 42).⁴⁹ This highlights a continuity with the previous power structure which, although it has reformed the political administration, still keeps the powers concentrated in the hands of the sovereign, who can still issue the *dahirs* (royal decrees) (Ferrié and Dupret 2011; Madani, Maghraoui, and Zerhouni 2012). Furthermore, he remains head of the Constitutional Court and can appoint half of its judges. Regarding religion, Islam remains the state religion (Art. 3),⁵⁰ and the king, *amīr al mu’minīn*, also maintains the *bay’a*, a symbolic act of loyalty that is laden with the power of political and religious legitimacy – alongside the trilogy God, Homeland, and King of the Kingdom, which is mentioned in Article 4⁵¹ (Tozy 1999; De Poli 2013).

1.3.8. *Ḥarakāt 2016*

In November 2016, in the city of Al-Hoceima, a fisherman was crushed by a waste collection truck while trying to recover his catch of fish, which the police had confiscated. This event was the catalyst for longstanding discontent, which found in this episode the spark for an explosion of protests and demonstrations in the Rīf region.

There were further solidarity marches organised by the Moroccan diaspora abroad and in other regions of Morocco, but the Rīf region also had demands related to the severe marginalisation experienced there. In fact, there was a significant lack of basic social infrastructure, such as universities and hospitals, and a high level of militarisation in the region. The protests of the Rīf were united

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

and persistent, and the government's response was a harsh repression that, starting from October 2017, affected numerous activists from the region.⁵²

This event is better understood in the context of the region's history, which has been central to the anti-colonial and anti-Makhzen struggle in the twentieth century. Indeed, between 1921 and 1927, the Rīf War took place, led by the symbolic figure of 'Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi, leader of the Rīf resistance movement, who managed to end the Spanish protectorate in 1927. The region gained independence from the protectorate but also from the Makhzen, creating a confederated state of Imazighen Riffian tribes. The history of resistance, as well as the anti-colonial *jihād*⁵³, remained in Moroccan memory, as did the brutal joint attack by France and Spain, in which chemical weapons were used, and more than 12,000 Riffians were killed.⁵⁴

The protest movements of 2016 are rooted in this historical memory and the ongoing reshaping of power dynamics, which, since the French Protectorate, have resulted in greater concentration of power in the Makhzen. This has caused increased socio-economic marginalisation of peripheral and rural towns and regions, characterised by very high youth unemployment and shortages in healthcare and educational infrastructure (Loimeier 2013; Bennani-Chraïbi 2019). In addition, the *Ḥarakāt* movement has advanced identity claims related to Imazighen roots, which recall the marginalisation of the Amazigh population that began with the Dahir of 1930 and intensified after independence in 1956 (Loimeier 2013).

1.3.9. A matter of (political) language

As analysed so far, the sociolinguistic heterogeneity of Morocco stems from its rich history of intertwining and encounters. It remains that the native peoples

⁵² For more information on this, read: Wolf (2019); Belarbi (2019); and Amnesty International (2018) : <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2018/06/morocco-guilty-verdicts-returned-in-unfair-hirak-trials-must-be-overturned/>. Accessed June 27, 2026.

⁵³ One of the aims of the resistance was also the protection of the Islamic religion.

⁵⁴ For in-depth research on this issue: Pennell (1986) and Daudin (2023).

of the Moroccan territories are the Imazighen, and for this reason, the revolts of the *Harakāt* and the official recognition of the Tamazight language in the 2011 Constitution recount an ancient historical experience.

The linguistic issue remains a subject of debate (Ennaji 2005), particularly regarding the official use of languages and their transmission in education. From the colonial and post-colonial periods onwards, Morocco adopted Arabic and French as official languages to meet strategic, political, social, and economic needs. In fact, Arabic is considered the language of Islam; for this reason, there was a need to standardise the population linguistically by religion. The second is to maintain communication and commercial relations with Francophones, while maintaining a connection with Europe (Benkharafa 2013). These political, social, and economic reasons continue to underpin the official recognition of languages in Morocco and are also reflected in the reforms post-2011. Although Tamazight was recognised as an official language in Article 5 of the 2011 Constitution, various structural issues have arisen in its implementation within schools and institutions due to a lack of concrete tools (Bounouche 2025). In particular, there is a skills gap in schools, a lack of tools for teachers, and a lack of textbooks.

Furthermore, as part of the development plan “Strategic Vision 2015-2030”, which also aims to improve the Moroccan education system, the Law Framework 51-17 was enacted in 2019. This law – in addition to English and Spanish – designates Arabic and French as the languages of instruction for scientific and technical subjects in public primary and secondary schools. In doing so, it maintains a hegemonic and discriminatory division between Tamazight and the other languages, thus reaffirming French and Arabic as privileged official tongues, flanked by other colonial languages such as English and Spanish (Mansouri 2023; Bounouche 2025).

Therefore, although the Amazigh community receives symbolic recognition and Tamazight has official status, in practice, the political and economic strategy favours the use of standard languages such as Arabic, French, English, and Spanish. These tongues are considered more practical for commercial

communication and maintaining competitiveness in the labour market (Bounouche 2025). This demonstrates the tension and ambivalence of government policies, which seek a constant balance between popular support and international approval, often leaning more towards the latter, and are also linked to the political and economic interests of the Kingdom (Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso 2020).

1.3.10. The Abraham Accords

In December 2020, the State of Morocco and Israel signed the Abraham Accords, aimed at normalising and regulating cooperation between the two countries in broad strategic sectors, especially in political and economic areas. These agreements were significant not only because they stabilised already quite solid diplomatic relations, but also because of the symbolic consequences of this political manoeuvre. In fact, this agreement triggered significant debate within Moroccan society and politics, as both the royal palace and the Moroccan people have historically shown solidarity with the Palestinian cause. They condemn the Israeli military occupation in Palestine and its aggression toward other Arab nations.

Consequently, protesters argue that the Abraham Accords, along with broader diplomatic and economic ties with Israel, indirectly legitimise its aggressive political actions (Casani and Colin 2023). In fact, this agreement, overseen by the USA, primarily serves Mohammed VI's goal of securing international recognition of Western Sahara⁵⁵ as part of Moroccan territory. This move aims to legitimise what was previously considered occupation, thereby legally extending Morocco's territorial sovereignty (Fernández-Molina 2018; Casani and Colin 2023).

Furthermore, other narratives advanced to justify this manoeuvre included restoring economic stability, increasingly compromised by global political-economic dynamics such as the war in Ukraine and Covid-19, and seeking a

⁵⁵ For an in-depth study on the Sahrawi issue and the resulting political relations with Algeria: Arieff (2013), Dann (2014), and Fernández-Molina (2018).

legitimising discourse for normalisation, referencing the ancestral connection with the Jews of Morocco (Rddad 2021),⁵⁶ who, before the formation of the State of Israel, hosted a large Jewish community (Deshen 1989; Gottreich 2007).

Another key political outcome of these agreements was the reorganisation of power dynamics within political institutions. Notably, this included reaffirming the King's dominance as the primary decision-maker, especially in foreign policy, as well as changes in roles among parliamentary parties (Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso 2019; Casani and Colin 2023). At this venue, Salaheddine El Othmani, leader of the PJD party and head of government, faced considerable difficulty, as he had to sign the agreement despite his ideological opposition to it. Consequently, the party lost support, a trend that was evident during the 2021 elections (Masbah 2021).

Meanwhile, many groups within the Moroccan population have voiced protests and conflicting opinions about the Makhzen's decision. The Moroccan Front for Supporting Palestine and Opposing Normalisation, also called the National Front, was established to support the Palestinian people. It also addresses a range of political and human rights issues both internationally and within Morocco. In fact, the Front comprises several associations, including Justice and Spirituality (the Islamist association), left-wing parties, the National Ittihad Congress, and others, making it unique in its heterogeneous composition of political actors who would otherwise struggle to reach common agreements (Casani and Colin 2023).

The restrictions imposed by the Government on public spaces due to Covid-19, in addition to being a strategic tool to delegitimise spaces of dissent, also caused a shift in the "location" of dissent, which moved from public streets to social media.⁵⁷ This led to new methods of action and grassroots political

⁵⁶ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/conflicting-moroccan-responses-normalization-israel>. Accessed June 13, 2026.

⁵⁷ Digital activism had already been successfully experimented with during the 2011 protests; for a more in-depth study, see: Slaoui (2014).

discourse, including various boycott campaigns (such as Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions and the Moroccan Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel) and the spread of dissenting narratives against the domestic and foreign policies of Morocco and Israel (Jaabouk 2021; Collectif 2022).⁵⁸

Therefore, beyond the immediate meaning of these agreements, their consequences were crucial to the change in Morocco's internal political landscape. Indeed, these accords led to the loss of support for the PJD party, which failed in the 2021 elections, and fostered the emergence of new actors and opposition practices, strengthening narratives and spaces for extraparlimentary and elitist political action (Bennani-Chraïbi 2019; Casani and Colin 2023).

1.3.11. The ruling neoliberal party

In September 2021, the elections were won by the National Rally of Independents (NRI), a neoliberal and monarchist party led by billionaire Aziz Akhannouch, marking the end of ten years of government by the Islamist party PJD and consolidating an alliance between the parties of the majority government and the Palace.⁵⁹ The decline of the PJD began in 2017, when the king favoured the resignation of the party's longtime leader, Benkirane, who was replaced by Saadeddine Othmani, thereby reshaping the political balance and the party's agenda. Furthermore, the economic recession, which peaked during Covid-19, and the signing of the Abraham Accords dealt a decisive blow to trust among PJD voters (Vendermeulen 2024).

This political change is particularly significant because the NRI's political agenda mainly focuses on investments and strategic objectives of an economic and diplomatic nature, consistent with the interests and ideological lines of the Palace, whose influence has been decisive (Szmolka 2024).

⁵⁸ Jaabouk (2021): <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/111462/maroc-ismail-haniyeh-boude-ihssane.html>. Accessed June 13, 2026.

Collectif (2022): <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/138138/maroc-l-appel-pour-mettre-normalisation.html>. Accessed June 13, 2026.

⁵⁹ For an in-depth study of the 2021 elections, which were significantly influenced by that year's electoral reform and the COVID-19 pandemic, see also Skouri and Akestour (2023) and Szmolka (2024).

1.4. The girl's Morocco: socio-historical and generational context from 1998

Given that the girls interviewed for this research were born between 1998 and 2007, it is worth considering the historical, social, and religious context in which they were raised. Firstly, they grew up under the new moderate political framework of King Mohammed VI, who ascended the throne in 1999 and, as previously mentioned, initiated a series of reforms concerning women's rights, the expansion of education, and the state religion. Additionally, in these early years, they began to notice the slow but significant spread of the internet (Hammoudi 1997; Tozy 1999, 2009).

A major reform in 2004, particularly impactful for Moroccan women, was the overhaul of the *Mudawwana*. This change broadened women's legal rights and protections, fostering a social atmosphere in which girls could better pursue their romantic, family, and marital goals, as well as greater independence – marking a shift from the experiences of earlier generations (Ennaji 2010; Charrad 2012).

Another significant change, especially from a religious perspective and in how Muslim women are perceived, was marked by the religious reforms and the introduction of *murshidāt* in the early 2000s. Indeed, during childhood and adolescence, girls grew up in a Morocco where the state was strengthening its control over the religious sphere following the 2003 attacks. As part of this strategic political manoeuvre, the aim was to legitimise an orthodox narrative of Islam, consistent with the Maliki interpretation and a moderate reading of Islamic sources. As previously discussed, to achieve this, the King established *madrasāt*, trained *a'imma* (plural of *imām*), and also the *murshidāt*. The latter were important religious figures who symbolise and represent legitimate femininity in Islam, but also significant authoritative presences in a context where, previously, religious authority was predominantly male (El Katiri 2013; Rddad 2018).

Another significant global factor is the “War on Terror”, which, after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the USA, began to spread and promote Islamophobic narratives worldwide. The 2003 Casablanca attacks further

integrated these discourses – originally mainly Western – into the Moroccan public debate, causing a division between moderates (Mālikī and Sufi) and radicals (Salafists) (Salime 2007; Wainscott 2015; Sheline 2018).

Another significant historical and social event that some experienced during adolescence and others remember from childhood was the 20 February Movement. This took place during the 2011 protests that animated cities across numerous Arab-speaking countries. This political phenomenon brought to light the socio-economic issues of marginalisation faced by young people, allowing them to gain greater visibility and introducing new discussions on citizenship into the Moroccan political scene, as well as leading to transformations in public debate (Hibou 2006, 2011; Masbah 2018).

Finally, but not least, we are talking about a generation that grew up during a period of rapid change, driven by globalisation and social media. These developments have made it possible to cross national borders and access the wider world, providing numerous stimuli, especially for women. In fact, access to social platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok among younger girls has enabled them to engage with diverse new narratives on topics including religion, gender relations, marriage, the *hijāb*, fashion, and more (Zaid et al. 2019; Menin 2024).

Additionally, the Covid-19 lockdown has significantly impacted social interactions, increasing reliance on remote and online socialisation methods, changing how people spend their leisure time. Furthermore, the severe economic recession caused by Covid-19 further worsened the precariousness of the population, especially among young people and women, with very high unemployment rates (Ennaji 2021; Stierl and Deanna 2022; Rostom 2022). This socio-economic condition has led to increased emigration of young Moroccans to Europe and the Gulf countries, with the aim of building more dignified lives for themselves and their families (Feixa et al. 2022).

In this context, it will be possible to observe how the interviewed girls intertwine traditional religious narratives and practices learned during socialisation

with their own desires, thoughts, reflections, and subjective aspirations, which are stimulated by the environment they are part of. This effectively breaks down the boundaries of the authoritative and institutional narrative traditionally confined to the Moroccan state and socio-religious institutions (Salih 2002; Zaid et al. 2022). Thus, these events illustrate how girls have matured in a complex, rapidly changing world characterised by escalating wars, crises, and growing hostility toward Muslims.

1.5. Conclusions

The history of Morocco is characterised by the arrival of Arab Muslims in the Imazighen lands at the start of the seventh century. During the Umayyad dynasty (697 - 909), the first instrumentalisation of religious discourse took place to legitimise a political act and resistance, namely the rebellion *fī sabīl Allāh* of the Imazighen population against the dynasty, employing rhetoric that delegitimised the Umayyad authority as they were not descendants of the Prophet and did not align with the principle of equality among Muslims promoted by the Qur'an and Hadith.

Under the Fātimid dynasty (909-1049), the dissemination of two important legal texts of Sunni-Mālikī doctrine, the *risala* and the *mukhtasar*, took place. The Mālikī thought in Morocco was reinforced during the Almoravid Empire, which ruled from 1055 to 1144. It was later revisited during the Almohad Empire (1144-1248) with the addition of the tawhid doctrine, which affirms the oneness of God and the connection between the submissive and Him. The policies implemented by the empire went beyond jurisprudence, concentrating on the individual's relationship with God, while also establishing religious police forces tasked with enforcing *Shari'a*.

Meanwhile, Sufi doctrine emerged, incorporating Mālikī jurisprudence and the doctrine of *tawhīd*, emphasising spirituality and the importance of expressing faith through belief and personal devotion. This new interpretation laid the

foundation for an innovative discursive tradition that challenged the legitimacy of the Almohads' political and religious authority.

The distinctive feature of Morocco's history is that, unlike other Muslim countries in the region (North Africa and the Middle East), it was not governed by the Ottoman Empire but by a succession of tribal dynasties, both Imazighen and Arab. Using the rhetoric of descent to legitimise their power, the Imazighen dynasty of the Wattāsids claimed descent from the oldest dynasty in Morocco, the Idrīsids. By establishing strategic alliances with urban authorities (*shurafā'* and the *a'yān*), the Wattāsids reinforced their political and social legitimacy.

Despite this, nearly a century later, the Sufi Sa'did dynasty formed alliances with tribal leaders and pursued *jihād* against the Portuguese invasion at Agadir, gaining the trust of the periphery. In fact, the social, political, and religious authority in the outskirts was held by Sufi scholars – while in urban areas, it was held by the *shurafā'*. During the Sa'did period of rule, the concept of *baraka* (blessing) entered the political sphere as an important religious symbol that bestowed upon its holder strong spiritual and political influence. Another significant element was that Sultan al-Mansur (1578-1603) established the Makhzen, the administrative and civil control apparatus – today recognised as the State and Government. Despite this, the dynamic between peripheral power (*bilād al-sība*) and central power (*bilād al-makhzan*) remained unchanged, and their structural differences are still evident today.

Within this structure of the division of powers, it becomes clear how the figure of the Sufi scholar gained importance in managing the politics of peripheral areas. He expanded his spheres of influence, starting in the religious domain and extending into legal, political, and social spheres, becoming a point of reference for communities of *bilād al-sība*. His role was also crucial in mediating with *bilād al-makhzan*, and the power dynamics between the two “areas” often fluctuated within a hierarchy that shifted between the periphery and the central authority.

The last dynasty, to which the current reigning King Mohammed VI belongs, is the 'Alawite dynasty. It, too, has utilised the Sharīfian roots to legitimise its

authority and to confirm that the King is not only a political leader but also, and above all, a religious guide, thereby conferring upon him the role of *amīr al-mu'minīn*. An additional symbolic religious act used as a means of political legitimisation is the *bay'a*, a contract – of Qur'ānic origin – that all authorities and institutions present in Moroccan territory (leaders of trade federations, *shurafā'*, military officials, *zāwiyas*, tribal chiefs, '*ulamā'*', merchants) are obliged to sign in order to endorse the caliphal authority of the dynasty.

Economic, regional, and global changes inevitably led to a gradual yet significant transformation of Moroccan trade. Indeed, from 1956 onwards, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, European merchants gained increasing control over the region's trade, also altering trade agreements with other countries and with Morocco itself. The latter suffered as a result, facing economic upheavals that caused instability in political and social spheres – conditions which France exploited by beginning its gradual occupation in 1899. Morocco's socio-political order, characterised by fragmentation and a plurality of political authorities, hindered efforts to foster cohesion among the population against the invader. Nevertheless, provincial authorities contributed to the weakening of the central authority, which was accused of allowing French forces to penetrate Moroccan territory, thereby demonstrating, on the one hand, the political strength, autonomy, and influence of the '*ulamā'*' and the *bilād al-sība*. On the other hand, it revealed the limited symbolic power of the Sultan and the central sovereign. In this context, the role of *zāwiya* was very important as centres of gathering, exchange, discussion, and support, as well as hubs for economic, legal, and religious activities, as well as for schools.

During the French occupation, the need to defend against invasion and attacks by non-Muslims became central to political-religious discourse. This context led to the formation of the first Salafist interpretative currents in Morocco, emphasising both *jihād* and the defence of the nation. It also led the '*ulamā'*' to participate actively in public debates, clarifying their political roles. To control and prevent national unity against occupation, the French introduced the Berber Dahir

in 1930, which for the first time distinguished linguistic groups – Arabic speakers remained under Shari’a, while Tamazigh speakers were governed by French law.

Through the strategic alliance with the Islamist-nationalist party Istiqlal, King Mohammed V restored legitimacy by utilising the “myth of the martyr Sultan,” who sacrificed himself for his nation. This political discourse, which combines religious symbols such as martyrdom with political symbols like the nation, was essential to fostering a stronger Moroccan sense of identity rooted in the triad of Allāh (God), *Watan* (Homeland), and *Malik* (King). French colonialism played a significant role in shaping Morocco’s religious and political systems.

Before the Protectorate, the figures of the *qāḍī* (judge) and the ‘*ulamā*’ (mediators) independently exchanged roles in managing social and tribal order, adhering to the Mālikī school of Islamic law. After the changes brought about by the French Protectorate, the mediation of the ‘*ulamā*’ became increasingly superfluous. The monopoly of legal and religious authority increasingly fell to state mediators who responded to the sovereign’s interests, leading to a political centralisation of power and religion.

Starting from 1969, the Moroccan political scene saw the formation of the first Islamist political groups, such as the *Al-Shabiba al-Islāmiyya* student group. The regional context influenced their political programmes, which followed the principles and social and political actions of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was engaged in social interventions (education and health) in Egypt.

Over the years, several political groups developed that carried the principles and values of Islam with different nuances. They formed a coalition to establish the political party *Al-Adala Wat-Tanmiya* (PJD) in 1998, which immediately received broad popular support. However, the crucial turning point was the support of the King, which came only after the ritualisation of the core principles of his authority: recognising the sovereign as the guide of the faithful, rejecting violence, supporting territorial unity, and respecting the religion and jurisprudence of moderate Islam (the Sunni Mālikī school). This was a political gesture that solidified religious principles within the country’s political hierarchy.

Furthermore, the King's support was also due to his view of the PJD as an excellent buffer between the Marxist-inspired leftist groups and the conservative Salafist groups. In fact, a few years earlier, King Hassan II had established a financial and political connection with Saudi Arabia in order to continue the reorganisation of the religious social order. In particular, he built *madāris* and religious associations between 1971 and 1976 to spread Wahhabi ideology.

The wars and invasions in the Fertile Crescent and in Afghanistan, as well as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, led Moroccan Salafism to harden on certain issues, such as opposition to relations with Western countries and to their political, economic, and social ideologies. Therefore, participation in external *jihād* against non-Muslim invaders became a tangible mission, especially in war-affected regions, made possible by strengthened relations between institutions and society. Their principles were based on reproducing the social order of the years of the *Ṣaḥāba* and on following the *Shari'a* legal system.

Starting from the 1990s, with the return of *mujahidīn* from external *jihād* trips to countries where conflicts were ongoing, Morocco experienced a wave of radicalisation of Salafism, also influenced by multimedia objects such as DVDs or internet sites where ideas and images related to armed resistance in the name of God (*jihād*) were disseminated. The terrorist attacks that took place in Casablanca in 2003 and 2007 and in Marrakech in 2011 triggered a series of legal, social, political, and religious reforms that shaped the structure of contemporary Moroccan institutions. Following the introduction of laws against terrorism and a subsequent authoritarian crackdown, later criticised by Amnesty International, the crime of torture was established. Moreover, the relationship between the State and Islam changed, intensifying the monopoly of Islamic discourse in the hands of the Makhzen, regarded as the holder of legitimate Islam, namely the Maliki school of thought. To reinforce this interpretation, the authority of the Supreme Council of 'Ulama' was strengthened by granting it the exclusive legitimate right to issue *fatāwā*, while keeping the institution under the crown's control, further consolidating its influence over the dominant religious narrative.

On the other hand, there was a presence of a “radical” or “deviant” Islam that was automatically associated with the Salafis, especially those living in suburban areas of major cities such as Casablanca and Fez. In fact, the numerous arrests made were aimed at young, illiterate boys from the poorer and more marginalised areas of the cities, where many vulnerable people were present. For this reason, from 2004 onwards, Mohammed VI implemented numerous social and urban reforms to revitalise neighbourhoods and reduce social exclusion, unemployment, and poverty. Additionally, he brought all mosques under the control of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

Furthermore, from 2006 to 2015, the King acted in the field of education, modifying the religious education system and promoting the Mālikī interpretation, including by creating Transnational Institutes to train African *a‘imma*. In addition to the training of *‘ulamā’* and *a‘imma*, female figures known as *murshidāt* were trained to raise awareness, disseminate the official discursive traditions of Islam, and prevent the spread of extremist interpretations. They are also highly functional due to their presence and actions within the community, working in hospitals and NGOs (Sheline 2018; Vandermeulen 2024). These figures also serve as models of Muslim women tolerated and diffused by the Makhzen.

The PDJ was the Islamist political party with the greatest support and the most seats in parliament from 2002 until 2021. After the elections in September 2021 (until today), the majority party in the Moroccan parliament is the Liberal Party NRI. The attacks of 2003, along with pressure from feminist movements, also prompted a reform of the *Mudawwana* in 2004, expanding interpretations of family relationship management under *Shari‘a* to incorporate international human rights norms. This reform was crucial in broadening gender equality on issues such as marriage, polygamy, consent, and inheritance – between men and women, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters – as well as offering greater protection for minors – sons and daughters. Several studies indicate that, in rural areas, the implementation of this reform has been slow and is ongoing, emphasising the vital role of the socio-economic context in family power relations.

Additionally, it becomes evident that power dynamics within society influence religious interpretations.

Before the protectorate, the Qur'an was studied and memorised by children in mosques and *zawāyā*. In 1970, King Hassan II made the teaching of religion compulsory at all levels of education and subsequently established departments of Islamic studies at universities. Following the reforms implemented by Mohammed VI, the approach to teaching religion shifted from mere memorisation of the Qur'an to teaching Islam as a doctrine that touches many aspects of everyday social life. The reform of the educational system was completed with the revision of the Islamic Education textbooks in 2015.

The school's authority remains a powerful institution alongside the family, since educational programmes serve both pedagogical and political roles, providing tools for critique and religious literacy. Schools have increasingly become a mediating space between the State, religion, and individuals. This allows us to further highlight what scholars have discussed regarding religion as a narrative rich in symbols that reproduces dynamics and power relations.

Despite this, the spread of social networks that facilitate the transmission of multiple ideas, images, scenarios, as well as contact with populations with different histories and the increasingly growing Moroccan diaspora present worldwide – especially in Western countries – has led to a more constant negotiation of ideas, approaches, actions, and religious interpretations. These “horizontal” circulations challenge the dominance of traditional religious narrative passed down by social institutions (e.g., family and state), questioning and reformulating pre-existing power relations. In fact, some scholars discuss the interconnection between two social, political, and religious pathways that Morocco is experiencing: on one hand, the secularisation of the country, which increasingly views religion as an individual experience; on the other, the downscaling of the religious sphere by moderate political actors.

The high social discontent caused by a high poverty rate, weak healthcare and educational infrastructure, corruption, and a high level of youth unemployment

led to protests in 2011, stimulated by ongoing revolts in neighbouring Arab-speaking countries, tired of authoritarian regimes and inequalities. This resulted in the reform of the Constitution, which, following a referendum in July of the same year, granted greater rights to Moroccan men and women; made Tamazight language official alongside Arabic; and redistributed the power structure among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches by granting the latter greater autonomy through the establishment of the Constitutional Court. Despite this, final decisions remain in the hands of the King, who is also the head of the Constitutional Court; he also continues to hold the role of Sultan – thus an authority not only political but also religious – expressed through the ritual of *bay'a*. The strategy implemented by the sovereign succeeded in maintaining his authority and political legitimacy intact.

The difficulty in implementing the aforementioned reforms also became apparent a few years later, in 2016, when protests erupted again in the Rīf region against the marginalisation experienced there, a region affected by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and a significant lack of hospitals, schools, and universities. The region has a strong history of colonial resistance and opposition to the Makhzen, which reached its peak during the Rīf War (1921-1927), led by the charismatic ‘Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi, who became an important symbol in Moroccan history. The *Ḥarakāt* of 2016 detail the historical struggles and intense marginalisation faced by the population of the Rīf and the Imazighen in general, up to that time (Loimeier 2013). This included high unemployment and the absence of vital social, health, and educational services necessary for community development (Loimeier 2013; Bennani-Chraïbi 2019). Moreover, the 2016 protests also advanced claims of an identity nature that began even before 2011 and found – in part – formal implementation with the constitutional reform of 2011, which introduced the Amazigh language as an official language alongside Arabic and French (Ennaji 2005). The linguistic issue also proves to be a political, economic, and social theme, since the languages of institutional and commercial communication – Arabic, French, English, and Spanish – remain those that offer

opportunities for growth and access to advanced training and the labour market. This was reaffirmed by Law-Framework 51-17 of 2019, which included French and Arabic as languages of instruction for scientific and technical subjects in primary and secondary schools and incorporated English and Spanish as second languages (Mansouri 2023; Bounouche 2025).

Another significant event for the socio-political fate of Morocco was the Abraham Accord, signed in 2020 between Morocco and Israel. The strategic goal of the Palace was to strengthen the economic and diplomatic alliance with Israel, but also and above all, to obtain international recognition of sovereignty over Western Sahara, which was indeed recognised by the USA, the architects and mediators of the Accord (Arieff 2013; Dann 2014). However, this manoeuvre led to numerous clashes and protests due to the massacres and Israeli occupation in Palestine, as the Palestinian cause has always been supported by the Moroccan people, political parties and the King (Fernández-Molina 2018; Casani and Colin 2023).

Consequently, there were various forms of political organisation that, through the formation of the Moroccan Front for Supporting Palestine and Opposing Normalization, carried out campaigns of boycott and demonstrations of dissent against normalisation, as well as against domestic policies. The modes of Moroccan political activism, even after repression and Covid-19, found space on digital platforms, reaffirming the potential of online activism (Slaoui 2014; Casani and Colin 2023). The dynamics of the agreement reaffirmed the King's dominance over political decisions, particularly in foreign policy. Furthermore, due to the signing of the Agreement by Prime Minister El Othmani, as well as the leader of the PJD party, he suffered a significant loss of trust from his voters, which was reflected in his defeat in the 2021 elections (Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso 2019; Bennani-Chraïbi 2019; Masbah 2021; Casani and Colin 2023). In fact, in 2021, the elections were won by the party most aligned with the Palace's ideological theories, namely the National Rally of Independents (NRI), led by billionaire Akhannouch. This shift from an Islamist party, such as the PJD, to a neoliberal one

marked a significant change across all areas, from religious to economic ones (Szmolka 2024).

Within this historical and social context, the girls interviewed – born between 1998 and 2007 – had the opportunity to be born and grow up in the kingdom of reforms under King Mohammed VI, who has been investing in various sectors, starting with expanding women's rights and investing in education (Hammoudi 1997; Tozy 1999, 2009). Since the reform of the *Mudawwana* in 2004, which equalised the rights of women and men in family law, the introduction of the *murshidāt* has also led to a change in the social order of gender – particularly in the religious sphere (Ennaji 2010; Charrad 2012; El Katiri 2013; Rddad 2018). Furthermore, regarding the latter, the girls grew up in an environment where the state progressively consolidated control over religious institutions and narratives. It promoted the official Mālikī interpretation of Islam and tolerated Sufi interpretations, which were seen more favourably compared to the radical Salafist perspective – aligning with post-9/11 Western policies targeting the “War on Terror” (Salime 2007; Wainscott 2015; Sheline 2018).

While some of these events occurred when they were very young or not yet born, it can be said that all of them – more or less consciously – lived through the 2011 protests, also known as the “Arab Spring”. This event marked an important turning point in the political participation of young women and men, as well as in the use of social networks for organisation and information (Hibou 2006, 2011; Slaoui 2014; Masbah 2018). Indeed, one of the most impactful phenomena for this generation was the rapid integration of the internet and smartphones into daily life – exacerbated by the Covid-19 lockdown – which significantly influenced the structure of social relationships, as well as desires, imaginaries, and ways of being Muslim and Moroccan young women. Covid-19 also led to significant economic instability and a recession, further increasing youth and female unemployment rates and worsening precariousness. This also intensified the already widespread phenomenon of youth migration towards Europe and Gulf countries, a common

prospect among Moroccan youth, especially those from lower socio-economic classes (Ennaji 2021; Feixa et al. 2022; Stierl and Deanna 2022; Rostom 2022).

It is precisely from these numerous stimuli that, through the girls' interviews, it will be possible to see the complexity of being young Muslim women born and raised in twenty-first-century Morocco, as well as in a world with increasingly blurred stability and fragile narrative boundaries (Salih 2002; Zaid et al. 2022).

PART II: DATA ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 2. MORAL JUDGMENTS, PRESCRIPTIONS, AND LIMITS

2.1. Introduction

In this second part of the thesis, I will analyse the interviews I have conducted. I will use pseudonyms and will not reveal in detail the girls' villages or towns of origin to protect their privacy. I will recount parts of my conversations with Lolita, a sixteen-year-old girl who lives in a working-class neighbourhood⁶⁰ in the suburbs of Casablanca with her parents, brother, and older sister. The father is unemployed after working as a labourer in a paint factory, and the mother is a housewife, thus demonstrating the family's socio-economic precariousness and lower-class status. During our chat, Hind also joined us, a friend of Lolita and her neighbour, a year older than her, but who shared little about herself.

Outside the university context, apart from Lolita and Hind, I was also fortunate to meet Zahra, a nineteen-year-old girl who lives in a working-class and peripheral neighbourhood of Fez. As a child, she lost her mother and now lives with her father and his new wife. Her father is a shoemaker, and her stepmother is a housewife. As Lolita, she is also in precarious socio-economic circumstances, but her family is still classified as part of the working-class urban group, as her father is an independent craftsman (Geertz 1964b). She is in her final year of secondary school and has shared her desire to enrol at university. I was able to get in touch with her thanks to Fauzia, a friend and neighbour of hers, whom I met at university.

Indeed, Fauzia is twenty-one years old, lives with her mother and father, and is in the final year of her undergraduate degree. Her mother is a housewife and makes handcrafted embroidery for her family, while her father is retired after working as a state auxiliary. Thanks to the stable income from her father's state pension, their socio-economic class falls within the lower-middle class. Both she

⁶⁰ In Moroccan Arabic, the deprived/working-class/popular neighbourhoods are commonly called *hayy sha'bī*.

and Zahra wear the veil and have shared more about their relationship with it, a topic that will be addressed in the next two chapters.

Another girl who is studying at secondary school is Siham, she is sixteen years old and the niece of the neighbour from the apartment where I lived during my study period in Fez. She also lives with her parents and her little sister in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Fez. She shares the ambition of enrolling at university once she has obtained her diploma. Both of her parents work at a bank, so they have stable incomes, and they can be considered a middle-class family in the Moroccan context.

With lower economic stability and additional “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 2018) associated with the middle class, Farida also comes from this socio-economic background. However, unlike Siham, her mother is retired after working in a bank, and her father has a degree and teaches French at a primary school in a city in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region. Farida is twenty-three years old and shares the fact that she is lesbian and feels part of the LGBTQIA+ community. An interesting fact is that most of the time during our conversation, she chose to speak in English. She is also one of the girls I met within the university environment and is studying away from home in Fez. Like her, Alia, Isra’, and Doha have also moved to Fez on their own to study at university.

Alia is twenty-five years old and hails from the Casablanca-Settat region, although she has paternal family roots in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region, from which she claims her Imazighen origins. She shares that she was raised by her grandfather for the first seven years of her life. Subsequently, she joined her parents in her hometown and completed her secondary education in a coastal city in the Casablanca-Settat region, demonstrating a high level of independence from her parents that she had experienced from an early age. Her father works in public construction, and her mother is retired after working as a seamstress. Therefore, their socio-economic background provides economic stability through both the mother’s pension and the father’s salary, leading us to classify them as part of the Moroccan working class.

Isra' is twenty-three years old and originates from a small village in the northern part of the Fez-Meknès region. Her mother is illiterate, and her father works as a car driver and has an elementary-level education. Therefore, given the low cultural capital and economic precariousness, the socio-economic context can be described as lower-class, yet she is a master's student at university and lives in student accommodation in Fez.

Doha is twenty-two years old and originally from a coastal city in the Eastern Region, where she has lived since she was eight. Previously, she lived in a rural village in the Fez-Meknès region with relatives. Her mother is a housewife, and her father is a driving instructor, which suggests the family is lower-middle class. Like Farida, most of the time during our conversation, she chose to speak in English.

Noura, who also lives away from her family, stays with relatives in Fez. She is twenty-two years old and comes from a small village in the northern Fez-Meknès area. Her father works as a technician installing boilers, washing machines, and solar panels, while her mother is currently unemployed after working in the textile industry. Thus, relying solely on the father's income, the family can be considered part of the Moroccan working class. Like Alia, she identifies with her Imazighen roots and often emphasises how speaking Tamazight and visiting her parents' home in a scenic mountainous landscape enriches her life. Even her discussions about spirituality and Islam frequently highlight nature as a central theme.

In this chapter, I will focus on the pressure of morality, understood as the set of norms, principles, and values prescribed and disseminated by social institutions (for example, family, school, and religious actors), and on how these are unconsciously reproduced by the individual (Butler 2002; Fassin 2012; Geertz 1993; Zigon 2007; Foucault 2014; Vacchiano 2021). In this sense, the aim is to identify the so-called *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) and to examine the expression of power in the ways in which the girls perceive certain moral issues, often related to the body and its expression. As previously discussed, the religious narrative tradition is embedded in power dynamics that are reproduced daily in people's

lives. These include conflicts, negotiations, and internalisations that can occur more or less consciously.

Furthermore, it will be possible to observe that, by practising religious rituals, they rediscover a connection between their bodies and spirituality. Many of the girls interviewed feel a sense of relief during and after prayer, which can help them attain the virtue of modesty, the very purpose of deference and faithfulness to God (Mahmood 2005, 2009; Abu-Lughod 2016). In addition to shaping daily life and connecting to reality, religious rituals also enable a dialogue between the social and individual body. In this, individual practices, especially public ones, together with the community of believers, help to create a network of “social solidarity” that strengthens the communal aspect of Islam and the girls’ sense of belonging to the *Ummah* (Issawi 1950; Ibn Khaldun 1958; Gellner 1961; Lahbabi 1964).

Through these religious rituals, the girls also express their ethical agency, which allows them to connect with reality through bodily actions. At the same time, it is the result of awareness and conflicts with a reality that may differ from their way of interpreting, living, and perceiving Islam. Indeed, in this context, primary and secondary socialisation have played an important role, both in shaping their positions and viewpoints and in stimulating questioning of existing moral norms. These feelings and their consequences will be the subject of the third chapter; in this chapter, we will focus on identifying and analysing them.

2.2. Islam in the life of *drriyāt*

2.2.1. Family and school education

Almost all the girls interviewed recalled that their initial exposure to the discursive traditions and practices of Islam was through observing their parents and family members perform rituals – particularly prayer and fasting. Many remember playfully mimicking their parents’ rituals, especially *ṣalāt* (prayer), as well as participating in celebrations such as *‘Īd al-Kabīr* (*‘Īd al-Aḍḥa*) and *‘Īd al-Sghīr* (*‘Īd al-Fiṭr*). Others, however, have had different experiences, ranging from

parents who do not practice to those who are more authoritarian. Additionally, the influence of *tarbiya islāmiyya* (Islamic education) at school has been significant, serving both as a means to supplement family education – stimulating curiosity – and as a factor leading to distancing.

After conducting semi-structured interviews, I asked the girls some common questions, such as: “When was the first time you engaged with Islam?” Their responses confirmed the role of family and education as key institutions that transmit the “registers of authority” (Vacchiano 2021), especially in religious contexts. These institutions fall under what Foucault (1980) describes as “regimes of truth”, as they act as sources of legitimate knowledge (Foucault 1982, 2014; Bourdieu 1990).

Based on what the girls shared with me, it is possible to find, in fact, very common journeys, with the exception of a few, but from which the diversity of experiences, types of education, and responses to them clearly emerges. Isra’ recounts that she saw her parents and relatives praying and fasting; she initially did not understand why they did it, but she knew it was for God and because they were Muslims. When she went to school, she began to make sense of everything and understand what Islam is. During *tarbiya islāmiyya*, she learned more about the religion and about some *munasabāt* (obligations) that must be observed as a Muslim.

Fauzia shares that since childhood, she has observed her parents praying, reading the Qur’an, and attending the mosque. At school, she learns about Islamic practices such as prayer, ablution, fasting, and the pillars of Islam, as well as the *Sunna* and obligatory acts (*wājibāt/farāid*). She gradually studies the Qur’anic *Surahs* while her parents teach her to read and memorise the Qur’an, guiding her on what is right and wrong according to Islamic moral teachings. She also recalls asking her parents about the origins of certain prohibitions; they explained that they are found in the *ḥadith* and/or the Qur’an, emphasising that learning deepens understanding.

Isra' and Fauzia are girls I met at the university. As mentioned in the introduction, Isra' is a master's student, originally from a village in the Fez-Meknès region. Her mother is a housewife and *maqariash* (uneducated), while her father has a primary education and works as a driver. Fauzia lives in and grew up in a working-class neighbourhood of Fez. Her father has been retired for many years and served as an auxiliary in the Makhzen, while her mother is a housewife and does small craft jobs for people close to her.

From their account, it is already possible to identify how Islam is taught in schools in terms of legal and ideological content, thereby spreading a specific interpretative framework that reflects the dominant one in Moroccan society and reinforcing the teachings passed down from the family. Indeed, as Talal Asad (1986b) argues, Islam is a “discursive tradition” that can produce specific knowledge and form a moral self. Therefore, building on what was previously analysed, it is possible to observe how they reproduce “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980), transmitting narratives, symbols, values, ideas, and sources that are logically and socially established. In fact, as I previously analysed, the Moroccan system is characterised by the Mālikī school of Islamic jurisprudence, which is considered moderate.

Another insightful story that highlights the significance and influence of institutions, particularly educational ones, is Siham's. As mentioned in the introduction, she is one of three girls I encountered and interviewed who do not come from university backgrounds. In fact, she is the granddaughter of the neighbour in whose house I stayed during my study period in Fez. Siham is an upper secondary school student and was born and raised in a peripheral neighbourhood of Fez. Both of her parents work at a bank, and for this reason, compared to Isra' and Fauzia, it is possible to identify her socio-economic context within the Moroccan middle class.

For her, the experience of Islamic education at school was particularly decisive. During our conversation, she emphasised how the teacher she had in secondary school instilled in her an interest and curiosity to explore research on

Islam. In particular, she often quotes him as exclaiming “*din diyalna ra bogoss*” (“our religion is cool”)⁶¹ to highlight, through every sensible, orderly, and logical narration, how Islam can provide a sense of logic, offer peace, justice, well-being, and order, thereby offering a strong sense of relief.

Farida shared a different perspective, criticising the superficial way religion was taught at school. She mentioned that during lower and upper secondary school, they learned certain Islamic laws, values, and principles, which she believes should be universal human principles. Consequently, she feels that the *tarbiya islāmiyya* lessons were too abstract, repetitive, and lacking substance. Furthermore, she recounts that her mother politely asks her to pray or give *ṣadaqa* (almsgiving) because it is important, but has never insisted on it or imposed it. Despite this, she acknowledges that she would not accept it if she were to convert to another religion or admit that she is no longer Muslim. Regarding her father, she says: “We thought he was Muslim. He did not use to pray. He used to drink alcohol from time to time in our family”,⁶² implying that, because he does not pray and drinks alcohol, he is not truly Muslim. The importance of prayer in being considered a Muslim often emerges in interviews, as it is the second of the five pillars of Islam. She continues by mentioning that he never explicitly told her to pray. Instead, when he saw a family member praying, he would say “*taqabbal Allāh*” (“God accept it”). If he saw her eating during Ramadan, he would just say “*bismillāh*” (“in the name of God”)⁶³, showing respect for her personal choices. She describes feeling free to express herself and emphasises that her father always welcomed her and helped her view issues from various angles.

Her experience differs somewhat from that of others, because as she recounts, her contact with Islam did not occur through observation, imitation, and her parents’ education; rather, she was indeed raised with Islamic moral values, such as her mother telling her to pray and give *ṣadaqa*, but also and above all by parents

⁶¹ Informal conversation with Siham. Fez, 26 March 2023.

⁶² Informal conversation with Farida. Fez, 24 March 2023.

⁶³ In Islam, this expression is often used before undertaking an action, so that it may be blessed by God.

and a family environment that was somewhat more distant from the dominant discursive Islamic tradition in Moroccan society. Farida is originally from the Beni Mellal-Khenifra region; she is a master's student and, like many of her classmates, she found herself in Fez alone for her studies. Her father has a degree and teaches French at a primary school, while her mother is retired after working in a bank. Farida identifies as a lesbian woman belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, and this aspect is inevitably significant in her relationship with the Islamic religion and Moroccan society.

It is interesting to note, in this case, the different experiences the girls lived through and the ways they perceived them. Regarding Farida's experience, I wonder whether her father's social background influences her lifestyle and her distance from Islamic tradition. As inheritance and the passing down of Islamic practices and customs have an impact, her parents' education and habits were also decisive in shaping how Farida lives and perceives Islam. Given that Siham's family is also part of the Moroccan middle class, Fauzia's father – a graduate – possesses “cultural capital” that the other girls' parents lack. Throughout the thesis, it will be possible to explore her viewpoints, which, interestingly, differ from the stories told by the other girls and are likely also due to the type of family she belongs to.

Regarding Alia's childhood, she shares that when she was little, she used to see her parents praying and emphasises that they were a “normal” family, giving the example of her father buying her a swimsuit for the beach, and that they watched all kinds of films and lived a “happy life”. However, she later notes a change: her father became more “straight” and began restricting her and her sisters from watching certain films or wearing bikinis at the beach. She continues her story by saying that when she was young, she was very fond of religion: she read the *qissas anbiya*, the stories of the Prophet and the *ṣaḥaba* (the Prophet's Companions), and discovered them at school during *tarbiya islāmiyya*. Alia lived the first eight years with her grandfather in a village in the Casablanca-Settat region and subsequently moved to the city with her parents. Her mother is retired and

worked as a seamstress, while her father works in public construction. She did not go into detail about her parents' education levels, but her stories have been interesting and will be explored further in this thesis. She also shares the story of her parents' "radicalisation" between 2008 and 2010, recalling DVDs, tapes, radio and TV programmes that came from Saudi Arabia and promoted a "literal" (Salafist) interpretation of Islam, which frightened her.

Regarding her experience with religious studies at school, she notes that during three of the four years at the village school where her grandfather lives, classes were often empty because teachers frequently did not show up. She only began studying seriously at the age of eight, when she moved to her parents' home in a big city. She also says she greatly enjoyed the subject, earned good grades, and was naturally curious. From this point, it is clear that there are gaps in social infrastructure, particularly in education, likely due to insufficient investment and funding. Her school years, dating back to the early 2000s, coincide with a time when initiatives to improve school infrastructure, especially in rural areas, had not yet been implemented.

Her father, used to pray and read the Qur'an; he insists that there must be a Qur'an at home, at least three of them in their house. And since she always saw it there, she started to read it after a while. By listening to and reading the stories about the Prophets, she began to love the religion, but this love was interrupted when her father asked her to wear the veil. She continues by saying that, for study reasons, she lived alone for a few years in a coastal city a bit farther south than where she grew up, and she began to lose faith, meaning she no longer wanted to be a believer. She was eighteen years old, in the last year of secondary school, sharing that: "One year, I did not even want to fast... watch out so no one hears me!... *Knt kn karha!* I hated it! Then I do not know what happened; I started reading a lot about religion, the Qur'an, and prophetic stories".⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Informal conversation with Alia. Fez, 13 April 2023.

I will revisit her shares in the following chapters, but at this point, I thought it was relevant to focus on the role of primary and secondary socialisation in shaping her relationship with religion and faith. Notably, since her father asked her to wear the veil, she has experienced feelings of distance and rejection towards religion – impacting her inner self and spirituality. The significance of freedom of choice frequently comes up in interviews with the girls, and I will explore this further later.

I also had the chance to meet Noura at university. She proudly identified with her Imazighen roots from a village in the Eastern Region. Her father is a plumber, and her mother is a housewife, although she previously worked as a seamstress in the textile industry. Noura mentioned that her mother did not wear the veil until her birth. Her father used to drink alcohol and did not pray. After Noura was born, their behaviour changed: her mother started wearing the veil, and her father began attending the mosque. Parenthood seemed to bring them closer to God. However, Noura argues that they are not “*mutashaddīn*” (“strictly religious”)⁶⁵ because her mother would remove her veil at weddings and similar events. Her father never insisted that she wear the veil or follow specific dress codes or rules. During our discussion, she often pointed out that, from her view, her parents and family, who have Imazighen roots, relate to Islam differently from individuals of Arab origin. This different relationship results in a less rigid interpretation of the norms established by the “orthodox” Islamic tradition. Regarding prayer, her mother told her stories and *ḥadiths*, but she was never direct or forceful, whereas her father never asked or spoke to her about it. She assumes that this is because his parents never imposed anything on him, and so – she supposes – he did the same with her.

She adds that her first contact with religion was at home. But she tells me that when she had doubts or curiosities about religion and asked her mother, her mother would reply that she should not ask certain types of questions because it is *ḥaram* (forbidden). In particular, she gives the example of when she asked her

⁶⁵ Informal conversation with Noura. Fez, 27 May 2023.

mother who had created God, and her mother replied that she should not ask such questions, otherwise God would punish her. Noura shares the dissonance that appeared in her mind from the moment she knew that God had invited humans to ask, read, and study because “*lm ‘arifa fl Qur’an ‘and Allāh ra waḥd lmakana kbīra bzāf... l-insān l- ‘alim, Rabbi ra ki ḥatto f waḥd lmarsala ‘aliya*” (“knowledge in the Qur’an to Allāh is a great place... the wise person, God has placed him in a high position”).⁶⁶ We will examine this issue more closely in the next chapter, along with generational conflicts and the changing approaches to religion, which are also mentioned in the upcoming sections.

The second space where she encountered religion was at school, but she also experienced significant dissonance there. She believed that even the teachers were not well-versed in the subject because they had not read the Qur’an, so they were unable to answer detailed questions. She then adds: “*ki khalliw insān mqmou’... ḥtach matqdarch tsowl... safi hiya ḥaja li galo lwalidīn, hiya li kina! Hiya ḥaja li gal lwstād, hiya li kina! Hiya ḥaja galo lina lshaykh, hiya li kina! Hiya ḥaja galo lina limām, hiya li kina...*” (“They oppress the people because you cannot ask for anything. Whatever the parents say is the truth! Whatever the teacher says is the truth! Whatever the *shaykh*⁶⁷ tells us is the truth! Whatever the *imām* tells us is the truth...”).⁶⁸

She continues her outburst, explaining that this is a generational issue involving their parents, grandparents, and teachers who have adopted norms without understanding their origins, leaving them unaware of the subject at hand. Furthermore, she emphasises that this prevents them from acting as Muslims and leads to a misrepresentation of Islam, illustrating how parental ignorance and illiteracy affect the understanding and practice of the religion, shedding light on one of the sparks of the ongoing intergenerational conflicts (Menin 2012, 2024; Zaid et al. 2022). I also want to highlight her awareness of and disapproval of this

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ A *shaykh* is a religious scholar or spiritual master, depending on the context; he holds a different kind of religious authority.

⁶⁸ Informal conversation with Noura. Fez, 27 May 2023.

issue, in which the “moral rupture” (Zigon 2007) occurred. Her experiences with these social realities led her to question this interpretation of Islam, initiating a personal journey of reflection and understanding. I will examine this in more detail in the chapter on agency and ethics.

Overall, this passage is insightful, as it confirms our earlier analysis and highlights the concept of “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980), showing the institutions empowered to propagate the dominant discursive tradition. Indeed, there is also a clear hierarchy of power that places the institutions endowed with the authority to disseminate knowledge at the top, against which it is difficult to argue. In fact, education through family and school continues to be a crucial means of shaping individuals’ responses and ideological views, supporting a social order maintained by long-standing balances and hierarchical structures.

2.2.2. *Assigning meaning to Islam and being Muslim*

First of all, according to all the girls except one, all of us human beings are born Muslim; in fact, this is mentioned in the Qur’an, in *Surah Ar-Rūm* (The Romans), in verse 30. Specifically, in this verse, it is theologically recognised that the human being is born with a natural tendency towards *tawḥīd* (monotheism), in this case, towards submission to God. The source that reinforces this verse and further clarifies that the monotheism in question is Islam is a *ḥadith* of the Prophet Muhammad. In the collection translated into English by M. Muhsin Khan of Sahih al-Bukhari’s *ḥadiths*,⁶⁹ it reports the narration of the *ṣaḥabi* Abu Huraira, who states that the Prophet said: “No child is born except on *Al-Fitra* (Islam), and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian [...]”.⁷⁰

In fact, even the girls interviewed say so; for example, Isra’ states that “*fesh tzadina zed m’ana wahd lfitrah anna ḥna Muslimīn*” (“when we were born, we

⁶⁹ The collection of *ḥadiths* in Sahih Al-Bukhari is regarded by the majority of Sunni Muslims as the most reliable source for finding the stories, sayings, and customs of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The book contains almost 7,653 *ḥadiths* (including repetitions) and was compiled in the ninth century by Imam Muhammad bin Ismail Al-Bukhari (810 AD – 870 AD – in the Islamic calendar: 194 AH – 356 AH).

⁷⁰ Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 2, Book 23, Number 440 (Khan 2009, 310).

were born with a predisposition to be Muslims”)⁷¹ and adds that, for her, Islam is life because it allows you to open numerous doors. Furthermore, she emphasises the importance of practising it through prayer, as it is through this that one goes beyond seeing Islam as merely an ideology and connects with its spiritual side. Similarly, Doha also shares the same view. For example, according to her, being a true Muslim means practising all the rituals. In fact, she adds that she truly feels Muslim because, at the moment she prays and generally during her daily routines, she feels a deep connection with God and with what she does, which allows her to realise that “religion is not only about material things, but also about spirituality as well”.⁷² As we said in the introduction, Doha is a master’s student from a seaside city in Morocco’s Eastern Region. Her mother is a housewife, and her father works as a driving instructor. Similar to Isra’, Doha is in her final year of her master’s studies. Like with Farida, although we initially agreed to conduct the interview in *Darija*, she often chose to speak in English.

Siham shares the feeling of being able to define herself as Muslim from the moment she “fears” God, prays regularly, helps those in need, and is *ṣabra* (patient), and therefore does not do “bad or *ḥaram*” things, such as drinking alcohol, having sexual relations outside marriage (*zina*), not praying, stealing, or speaking badly. When talking about this, she distinguishes between *ḥaqiqīn* (true) Muslims and others, emphasising that the latter are those who claim to be Muslim but do not do what she has previously mentioned. We will discuss this in more detail later.

Farida’s point of view and experience regarding the *dīn* differ somewhat from those of the other girls. In fact, Farida states that: “I’m not religious; I might be struggling. I do not know if I believe in God or if I do not believe in God at all, but I do not really believe in religion. Being a good Muslim is not just about doing your prayers and fasting, and then being a hypocrite. Being a Muslim should be

⁷¹ Informal conversation with Isra’. Fez, 23 December 2022.

⁷² Informal conversation with Doha. Fez, 21 March 2023.

about education: to educate yourself, to familiarise yourself because you are proud to be Muslim”.⁷³

Alia highlights that, spiritually, she identifies as Muslim. She prays, observes Ramadan, reads the Qur’an, and explains that, given her upbringing, leaving Islam is challenging because it is integral to her identity. She illustrates that if she travels to another country, she remains Moroccan; this does not change because it is part of her identity. Even if she leaves it behind, she will come back to it. For the same reason, she argues that she cannot follow another religion: “I need a belief which I found in Islam”.⁷⁴ These thoughts arose after she, during her adolescence, went through a period in which she distanced herself from the Islamic faith, to the point of hating it and not even wanting to fast, as she herself has recounted.

Furthermore, this passage is very interesting because it highlights the potential of religious discourse to express identity and, in this case, how religion can serve as a unifying force for a specific group or community, thereby fulfilling its social and political functions. Just as blood ties and social identity symbols were significant in the past and remain important today, the symbol of religion now also serves as a link to identity. It has the power to foster unity and solidarity through shared values, norms, ideas, customs, principles, and sentiments. Nevertheless, a strong sense of identity is also accompanied by the need to have faith, to give meaning to one’s surroundings, and to find a coherent order that provides emotional relief (Geertz 1993; Vacchiano 2021). Fauzia also sees Islam as part of her identity, admitting that she cannot imagine herself otherwise and explicitly referring to the fact that she would find it difficult to remove her veil. Indeed, for her, the veil began to serve as a significant ethical act in the construction of her identity, going beyond a simple sense of identity and encompassing deeper emotions related to well-being, likely also linked to the virtuosity of a Muslim woman (Mahmood 2009; Abu-Lughod 2016).

⁷³ Informal conversation with Farida. Fez, 24 March 2023.

⁷⁴ Informal conversation with Alia. Fez, 13 April 2023.

Concerning Noura, she considers herself Muslim because Islam is *manteq* (logical) for her. She continues her speech by saying that she has also read other religions (namely Christianity and Judaism), but she realised that Islam is more logical and realistic: “*Salih mn koullu zamān w makān*” (“it is right for all times and places”).⁷⁵ She talks about the Qur’an, emphasising that it states that faith should not be imposed and that one must believe in what one wishes to believe. No one can impose anything because this is not valid in Islam, and it is written by God in the Qur’an that “faith must be driven by love”.⁷⁶ In fact, she argues that “Islam makes sense for me; there is one God, and He does not have sons, does not have a wife”.⁷⁷ For her, what is logical are the *kalām* (words, discourses) in the Qur’an: “*Ayāt* are logical and are not too romanticised. I help others because it is logical and natural”.⁷⁸ The rationality she refers to concerns conscience, which we will discuss in the third chapter. The conversation with her took place mainly in *Darija*, but every so often she preferred to express herself in English, as Alia, Doha and Farida did. Since they study at university in English, it is a language they are very familiar with.

2.3. Well-being through rituals and practices – seeking balance

2.3.1. *Raḥa* (relief)

When discussing Islam and what it means to be Muslim for girls, it often emerges that practising religious rituals, such as prayer, provides a strong sense of *raḥa* (relief). The connection and communication with God, an omnipotent and merciful entity who listens and grants the girls strength, is also a very positive psychological motivator. In fact, when Doha talks about Islam, she describes it as a “psychological confronter” that gives her a “*raḥa nafsīya*” (“inner peace”, mental

⁷⁵ Informal conversation with Noura. Fez, 27 May 2023.

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

tranquillity),⁷⁹ and she states that during her menstruation she feels in a low psychological state because she does not have the relief that prayer provides her – the latter, in fact, is for her a cure. She also acknowledges that at first, she saw prayer simply as an obligation – repetitive gestures lacking meaning. Now, she sees it as a gift that offers her the opportunity to communicate her pain, feelings, day, and issues with *Allāh* during prayer. She emphasises that, with God, one can express episodes and emotions that are hard to voice or cannot be expressed to people, and that confessing sins to Him can bring relief, much like a conversation, but with a spiritual connection. In sharing this thought, she wanted to emphasise that the reason she truly feels Muslim lies precisely in the fact that, in her experience, religion is not merely material but also spiritual. In fact, it is a set of emotions, desires, values, and thoughts expressed through physical and material gestures, but also stimulated by deeper psycho-emotional processes (Geertz 1993; Mahmood 2005; McGuire 2008).

Doha also values God's tolerance, repeating that *Allāh* forgives the sins committed because He offers the possibility of being Muslim and faithful to one's own religion: "Even if you practice sexuality in a forbidden way, He can still forgive you".⁸⁰ Furthermore, she says that when she engages with the symbols and discourses of tolerance and mediation, her spirituality – and, according to her, that of every believer – grows increasingly strong. She states that this belief increasingly reinforces her faith in Islam, which she perceives as a balanced religion offering clear rules that are not extreme. These rules remain logical, allowing her the freedom to make mistakes and seek forgiveness from *Allāh*, fostering an intimate relationship with her faith.

Even Farida, though she does not see herself as religious, acknowledges the importance of faith, both in Islam and broadly, in providing comfort, well-being, and purpose in life. She admits that at times she feels regretful for not feeling fully at ease when praying to God, crying, or speaking to Him – trying to vent, feeling

⁷⁹ Informal conversation with Doha. Fez, 21 March 2023.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

heard, and accepted. For this reason, she recognises the importance of spirituality, even within an ideology not recognised as a religion, citing hippies as an example. She always considers herself a spiritual person, as she feels a connection with nature, observes its details, and is grateful for it. This form of faith gives her strength and a sense of purpose. Therefore, she appreciates certain aspects of Islam, such as *tasamuh*, a symbol of tolerance and acceptance often associated with *ṣabar* (patience). However, she emphasises that society does not reflect these principles, adding that, in her view, religion is positive when it promotes the well-being of oneself and others, without discrimination or restrictions.

Isra' shares that when she reads the *ḥadith*, especially the Qur'an, with the *kalām Allāh* (the words of God), she experiences strong emotions that come directly from her heart. Zahra claims that "*dīn ki ḥayad laktiyab*" ("religion helps you get through depression")⁸¹ because it assists in life, at school, and in health; for this reason, she also says that "*dīn zwīn, wa 'ar!*" ("religion is beautiful, and it is tough!").⁸² She is friends with Fauzia, and they were born in the same neighbourhood, a popular area on the outskirts of Fez. She is in her final year of high school, and she would like to start university as well; her father is a shoemaker, and her mother died when she was a child.

Siham also feels great relief when she prays and listens to the Qur'an and to the *kalām* of God. She gives the example of when, during Ramadan, she goes to the mosque and performs the *Tarāwīh* prayer;⁸³ she finds those moments to be an immense relief because she imagines herself in Paradise, which gives her a very high sense of chill and serenity. Then she emphasises that praying is important and that it is also a moment of being with oneself and with God, highlighting that when someone does so, God is with them and might even give them more than they ask for.

⁸¹ Informal conversation with Zahra. Fez, 13 June 2023.

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Special prayers performed during Ramadan after the 'Isha prayer.

It is very interesting to see how spirituality is central to the girls' well-being and relief. It is very important because it helps them make sense of everyday life and their emotions, finding a connection with deeper parts of themselves. In fact, it could be argued that the moments when they find themselves venting and speaking with God can also be seen as individual spaces they grant themselves to communicate with their conscience, with themselves. Of course, it is a conscience influenced by the moral norms of the social context in which they live, but it also goes beyond that, stimulating "moods and motivations" (Geertz 1993) that transform those who have faith in it, emotionally and psychologically (Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007, 2009). Furthermore, as we have already noted in some passages and as we will see in more depth in the third chapter, the agency of the girls often comes into play, challenging certain norms and behaviours, and taking up a broader and more personal space (Salime 2007; Mahmood 2009; Menin 2012, 2024; Rddad 2018).

Awareness, or more generally, faith in a greater and stronger entity that understands the dilemmas of human beings as its creations, releases a sense of relief that, paradoxically, makes them feel powerful. Practising rituals that allow the connection between body and mind falls within this mechanism, which is why they strongly resemble ritual practices as a means of enabling them to experience these emotions. As we mentioned in the theoretical part, bodily practice is the key to connecting with spirituality and significantly transforms practitioners' daily lives. Simultaneously, daily events inevitably affect faith and the way rituals are approached (Geertz 1993; Mahmood 2001, 2005, 2009; McGuire 2008). In fact, significant examples include unpleasant episodes, traumas, or unforeseen events that the girls have encountered throughout their lives or in their daily routines, which have inevitably triggered responses related to faith and religious practices.

2.3.2. Fiha khīr: fate in moments of vulnerability and attributions of meaning

As previously mentioned, faith in Islam offers comfort and renews a sense of purpose, particularly in times of vulnerability and challenges. *Qadar* (destiny)

plays a crucial role in offering comfort and understanding of events, whether positive or negative. Doha explains that if a dream of yours does not come true, it is because God has chosen not to let you achieve it, knowing it would probably not bring you happiness in the future. The phrase “*fiha khīr*” is often used to suggest that even in negative events, there is something good, though it will only become visible in the future, even after many years.

Isra’ also delivers a similar speech, using a hypothetical example of being late to an important event like a marriage. She highlights the same point about punctuality, suggesting that if people had left earlier, they might have avoided an accident, as *Allāh* changes plans because what you intend is not always written in your destiny. She mentions that during stressful or tense moments, it helps to say phrases that remind you that you are in God’s hands and that you entrust your fate to a better one. She shares an example of a math test she studied hard for that ultimately did not go well. At first, she was upset, but then she accepted it, thinking it was not in *Allāh*’s plan. She tried again later, studied more, and passed with a good grade, showing she believes God’s plan is probably more satisfying. She emphasises that attitude and principles are essential – you must believe and try hard, but if things do not turn out as expected, there is no need to stress or despair, because it might not be good for you. Finally, she adds: “*Waḥd y dir li ‘li w lbaqi ‘la Allāh*” (“a person does what they can do, and the rest is up to God”).⁸⁴ In this regard, as Siham also mentioned, Isra’ believes that the matter of marriage is in God’s hands, that it will come at the right time, and that it should not be forced because one must have patience to accept what contains goodness.

The issue of destiny intertwined with marriage and romantic relationships is a theme that often emerges, even in Menin’s works (2012; 2024), where her interlocutors refer to the existence of greater forces that limit human actions, and this awareness leads them to reflect, seeking and finding alternative ways to achieve their own balance. Therefore, in her study, love is not only considered in

⁸⁴ Informal conversation with Isra’. Fez, 23 December 2022.

terms of “freedom and choice, but as a space that raises key ethical and cosmological questions, with which people work out their relationships, desires, and dilemmas” (Menin 2024, 15).

Isra’ emphasises the understanding that, despite bad events, life comprises both good and bad experiences, like death, affirming that: “We know that sooner or later we will die and that, in the end, people return to *Allāh*. There is Paradise and Hell; everyone will die”.⁸⁵ This example recalls the grief experiences shared by two girls, Zahra and Siham. Zahra shares that her mother died when she was three, leading her to live with different relatives before her father remarried. When she reached menarche, she felt lonely and confused. Online resources were vital to her experience; she searched for information and found female role models on YouTube who discussed Islamic practices. These insights reinforced her faith, motivating her to wear the veil and later the *khimār*.⁸⁶ She shared that, in her opinion, religion has been very helpful for her to overcome the blow of her mother’s death, but also to stay emotionally and psychologically active and to move forward in her life. Indeed, as previously mentioned, faith helps her not to fall into depression, and she emphasises that, for this reason, one must also be grateful and thank God for what one has.

Siham states that no matter what misfortune occurs, you should say “*Allāh wmalik lḥamd*” (“*Allāh* and the King of Praise”),⁸⁷ because “*fiha khīr*” (there is good in it). This applies even when you feel upset, such as when you miss a train or things do not go as planned. The same idea applies to a loved one who has passed away because God knows the reasons: “*Rabbi ‘raf ‘lash khda mnnk hadik lshakhs*” (“My Lord knows why He brings from you that person”).⁸⁸ Indeed, she shares that her two-year-old little brother passed away when she was almost ten years old. She recounts that he was ill, underwent some operations, and then passed away. She also explains that it is difficult to interfere with God’s decisions, to

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ The *khimār* is a type of *hijāb* that consists of a longer veil, which can reach down to the hips.

⁸⁷ Informal conversation with Siham. Fez, 26 March 2023.

⁸⁸ Ibidem.

question why and to endure suffering. She continues her argumentation, claiming that perhaps God has a larger plan and that this child, as he grows, might have become a son who annoys his parents, has health issues or creates problems, living and making others live difficult lives. She mentioned that trusting in *Allāh*, saying *alḥamdulillah* (thank God), and accepting His will – regardless of the outcome – would make her feel relieved, peaceful, serene, and in harmony with her emotions and surroundings. This perspective provides her with a sense of purpose in the world and fosters gratitude for her life.

These passages indicate that spirituality expresses itself through the body, seen in ritual practices and religious acts, as well as through guiding phrases that shape thoughts and attitudes toward daily and hard events. In this process, the girls engage in ethical actions that connect them to their inner selves and surroundings (Geertz 1993; Mahmood 2005, 2009; McGuire 2008; Foucault 2014).

2.4. Being part of a community, between relief and tensions

2.4.1. Social solidarity

As we discussed in the introductory chapter, religious rituals are central to the encounter with the community of believers. In particular, the practice of sacred rituals, such as fasting and devotion during Ramadan, *ṣalāt*, and *ṣadaqa*, allows for a deeper connection with a reality that presents a wide range of situations and emotions, both individual and, especially, social. The stories of the interviewed girls highlight the importance of being part of the Muslim community (*Ummah*), as it embodies shared principles, values, goals, and ways of finding meaning in life and the world – transcending national borders.

Despite this, the perception of assigning unanimous meanings to the same symbol often clashes with a much more heterogeneous reality, in which individuals attribute their own specific meaning to the symbol and, consequently, engage in practices that can differ from person to person – or they may adopt the same practices, but assign them different values and meanings (Geertz 1993; El-Zein

1977; Mahmood 2005, 2009). In fact, some interviewees remember certain rituals not primarily as sacred symbols with spiritual meaning, but more as social symbols that encourage, foster, and enhance moments of friendliness, sharing, community, and togetherness.

From this perspective, a sense of belonging to a community is a stimulus the girls perceive as emotionally positive, helping them feel less alone in a global socio-economic system that promotes individualism. For instance, Siham highlights how touching and humane it is when a misfortune occurs, such as an accident, and people quickly gather to help, expressing concern and offering prayers, demonstrating solidarity. Siham was born and raised in a suburban neighbourhood of Fez, an urban setting where community dynamics, as in rural villages, are less taken for granted.

As Aristotle also argued, human beings have a natural tendency to organise themselves into communities and to interact with one another. This fundamental characteristic is reinforced by how this positive attitude towards practising and feeling part of a community emerges as people share ideas, emotions, values, thoughts, and actions.

Since religious rituals like Ramadan and *‘Īd al-Adḥa* are also social practices, Isra’ believes that gathering together is a beautiful aspect of her *dīn* and one of her favourite parts of it. Farida also emphasises the importance of sharing moments with her family and explains that, for her, religion is significant because occasions such as Ramadan and religious festivals evoke her childhood memories. These events strengthen her sense of connection with her family and community. In describing this, she notes that she neither fasts nor observes the typical moral practices of this month, such as prayer. However, she expresses that she really enjoys the festivities because “I feel connected and I have a sense of belonging.”⁸⁹ Additionally, she notes that this month she prefers to avoid eating out as a sign of solidarity, and she feels very excited when it is time to cook something special for

⁸⁹ Informal conversation with Farida. Fez, 24 March 2023.

the whole family and share the meal during *iftār*.⁹⁰ Siham also shares that during the month of Ramadan, when she has her period and is therefore excused from fasting, she prefers to eat the minimum necessary because she feels uncomfortable being the only one *fātra* (not fasting) while everyone around her is fasting, “*bash ḥta ana nḥas rani m ‘ahom*” (“so I also feel like I am with them”).⁹¹

Farida greatly appreciates it when friends, family, and acquaintances wish her a happy Ramadan or a good end to Ramadan, and she celebrates by wearing the *takshīta*⁹² during *ʿĪd*. Therefore, from her account, it emerges quite clearly that within an environment of social solidarity, there is also a sense of belonging that is expressed both in sharing challenging and virtuous moments, such as fasting all day, and in the satisfaction of sharing good food after these days.

It is also linked to a sense of identity that manifests in dressing in the traditional attire worn by Moroccan women during religious festivals and weddings, and in feeling part of the family and community, despite differences in spirituality and practices. In fact, she states that Islam is her “culture”, describing it in this way because, as mentioned earlier, her Islamic rituals are more related to social and customary practices than to spirituality. Indeed, as previously noted, she considers herself non-religious even though she identifies as Muslim.

As discussed in the chapter dedicated to the theoretical framework, religion can be seen as a cultural system, since, similarly, it gives meaning to life through symbols and offers models (or languages) to express oneself, act, and react in social interactions, also providing the possibility to experience them (Lapidus 1984; Geertz 1993; Mahmood 2009; Abu-Lughod 2016). From Farida’s experience, it is therefore possible to find this aspect, stripped of the spiritual, but equally religious and social.

Alia feels that, given her background, leaving Islam is challenging because it is deeply intertwined with her identity. She values practices like Ramadan and the

⁹⁰ The term derives from the word “breakfast” and indicates the meal that breaks the fast during the month of Ramadan. It coincides with *maghrib*, that is, sunset.

⁹¹ Informal conversation with Siham. Fez, 26 March 2023.

⁹² It is a traditional Moroccan women’s dress worn for ceremonies, weddings, and celebrations.

way she spends Fridays, viewing them as both spiritual and cultural; they have become an integral part of who she is (Mahmood 2005, 2009; McGuire 2008; Schielke 2009) The fact that during her adolescence she experienced a period of detachment and further exploration of monotheistic religions adds greater value to this sharing, which also reveals a broader process of questioning, negotiation, and choice in this regard (Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Foucault 2014).

Regarding the sharing of convivial moments during religious rituals and festivals, both she and Fauzia mention customs such as eating couscous, fasting during Ramadan, and making *iftār* (breaking the fast) with family, who gather and invite one another. Alia also refers to *‘Īd al-Adḥa* (*‘Īd al-Kbīr*), particularly when, after the ram is sacrificed, the meat is shared with neighbours and eaten together, or when visiting grandparents and relatives in the *‘orobiya* (rural villages). In fact, it fondly recalls the years she spent with her grandfather in the countryside, often referring to the simplicity and sense of community she found there.

Another important moment to strengthen the sense of belonging to the *Ummah*, a shared identity, and spiritual awareness is collective prayer in the mosque and the *msalla*⁹³ during *‘Īd al-Kbīr* and *‘Īd al-Sghīr* (at the end of Ramadan). In fact, both Alia and Fauzia discuss it, albeit with different approaches: Alia shares that she likes to go to the mosque, even though she does not go often, and that, in her opinion, practices such as going to the mosque or gathering, in general, are what lead to love of *dīn* (religion), adding that “when you get used to it and then distance yourself, you notice the difference”.⁹⁴ For Fauzia, it is also more beautiful to pray in the mosque than at home because the whole community is there, and during Ramadan, it is even more beautiful because many more people attend. For Alia, the most meaningful part of the *msalla* is the moment

⁹³ This term, used in this specific context, refers to the place where Muslim worshippers gather to perform the *‘īd* prayer, which traditionally takes place on the morning of *‘Īd al-Adḥa* and the *‘Īd al-Fiṭr*. Usually, places outside of mosques are also used, such as football fields and streets, due to the high number of participants.

⁹⁴ Informal conversation with Alia. Fez, 13 April 2023.

after prayer, when those nearby hug her and wish her a happy *‘īd*, even if they are strangers, which she finds an emotionally intense and special experience.

Fauzia, on the other hand, delves a bit deeper into the theme of spirituality and speaks of “*salam dakhili*” (inner peace) when she realises she is surrounded by a community devoted to God, who pray and read the Qur’an. While discussing these matters, she often thanks God and notes that it is a great joy for her to go to the mosque during *‘īd* and to see many people filling the mosques and the streets to pray together. Fauzia was born and raised in a working-class neighbourhood of Fez, a city that symbolises the roots of Islam in Morocco, and this inevitably shapes how religious rituals are experienced within the community. Another factor that draws attention and gives her relief is seeing families, happy people who give each other dates and water and take care of one another. Her spiritual involvement also emerges because, at the end of this sharing, she exclaims enthusiastically: “*Alḥamdulillah*, our Islam is the religion of happiness!”⁹⁵

Building on the theoretical’s discussion of understanding religion as culture (Geertz 1993), it is confirmed that the symbols within religion – particularly the sacred ones – also function as means for individuals to (re)act, feel, and express themselves socially. In this context, Farida interprets festivals such as Ramadan as opportunities to enjoy convivial moments and experience the emotional connection of being part of a family and community, sharing practices and emotions. The same applies to Alia and Fauzia, who experience it differently, since their spirituality and Islamic faith also come into play. In fact, these rituals allow them to give a tangible meaning to their faith and the social reality surrounding them, enabling the spiritual and social aspects to intersect and to ascribe multiple meanings to the same symbol.

Fauzia and Siham also discuss *ṣadaqa* (charity), particularly *zakāt*,⁹⁶ and the importance of helping those in greater need when one has the material capacity.

⁹⁵ Informal conversation with Fauzia. Fez, 04 July 2023.

⁹⁶ *Zakāt*, one of the five pillars of Islam, is an annual charitable payment – typically made during Ramadan – based on the assets owned. In fact, there are specific rules and calculations for *Zakāt* that differ each year, among families, and across countries, all designed to aid the needy and promote wealth redistribution.

The aspect of mutual care and the creation of a supportive community network emerges strongly from the narratives of the girls interviewed. Indeed, as previously discussed, Islam has a significant discursive tradition at the communal level (Lahbabi 1964). For example, Zahra believes that the *dīn* takes care of you and helps you gain more respect for yourself and others. Siham says the same when talking about the fact that one should want “*lkhīr lakhourīn kimma kt bghi lrask*” (“good to others as you want good for yourself”).⁹⁷ She also quotes a phrase – “*twḥbbuh li akhy kimma tu ḥibbuni nafsi*” (“you love for your brothers what you love for yourself”)⁹⁸ – that recalls a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁹ Zahra and Siham, like Fauzia, grew up in Fez and, as discussed previously, this may influence the girls’ approach to Islam.

Doha also speaks about it, sharing her vision in a more structured and profound way, emphasising that the light in dark times often comes from small acts of help directed towards others. In particular, she highlights that “this is how religion teaches us to behave with people”.¹⁰⁰ When I asked her to specify, she told me that she means: “helping them, giving advice, thinking of other people, sharing their own problems, sharing goodness, making them comfortable, being like a friend to them, helping them, saving their life, etc. So, not just in terms of action or behaviour, but in general, everything that cannot hurt you, either from your internal world.”¹⁰¹ As mentioned before, Doha comes from a lower-middle-class family and spent the first years of her life in a city in the Eastern Region and, subsequently, in a small town in the Fez-Meknès region. When she was a teenager, she decided to wear the veil, saying she felt very connected to her faith.

Fauzia, Alia, Doha, Zahra, and Siham experience a deep sense of belonging and spiritual relief through public religious practices, community involvement, and acts of care and mutual support. These activities also highlight themes of virtue

⁹⁷ Informal conversation with Siham. Fez, 26 March 2023.

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁹ “Narrated Anas: The Prophet said, “None of you will have faith till he wishes for his (Muslim) brother what he likes for himself.” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 1, Book 2, Number 12 – Khan 2009, 14)

¹⁰⁰ Informal conversation with Doha. Fez, 21 March 2023.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem.

and devotion, as performing them enhances personal well-being and nurtures psychological and ethical well-being. Participating in these shared rituals, which link the spirit and body of believers and foster connections and relationships, creates what McGuire (2008) calls an “intersubjective experience”, reinforcing connections and promoting stronger “social solidarity” (Issawi 1950).

2.4.2. *Bodies that communicate: between conflicts and contradictions*

Belonging to the community also brings about a sense of identification with it. In particular, this sense is driven by both conscious and unconscious awareness of shared values, ideas, symbols, behaviours, beliefs, and moral languages (Bourdieu 1990; Geertz 1993). This fuels what we discussed earlier, namely the feeling of not being alone in an increasingly individualistic world (McGuire 2008). In fact, Doha, speaking about the sense of community in being Muslim, recounts an anecdote about her aunt who was in line at the Moroccan consulate in Italy, and someone jumped the line, and she said to them: “Why are you doing so? *Za‘ma ḥna muslimīn, makhasnash ndiro hakka mashi* because you are rich and *mo‘rof*, you can pass avant from who are *shad lcue shḥal w howa tmmak*” (“[...]Basically, we are Muslims, we should not do that, not because you are rich and well-known; you can pass ahead of those who are waiting since long time”).¹⁰² From this story, it emerges how feeling part of a community, in this case, an Islamic one, can at the same time lead to conflicts in which moral norms clash with subjective contradictions, as well as with different ways of being, interpreting, and implementing such norms by each one. This is actually fertile ground that encourages individuals to reflect consciously on their moral values and act in accordance with their personal traits. I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter; however, in this section, I find it interesting to highlight the moments where, based on the girls’ stories, these conflicts and contradictions become evident.

¹⁰² Ibidem.

As we previously discussed, the human body can be understood as an “arena” within and through which the exercise of power is enacted (Bourdieu 1990; Wacquant & Bordieau 1992; Mattalucci 2003, 2012; Menin 2012; Abu-Lughod 2016; Foucault 1980, 2014). The emergence of this dynamic and relationship of power is visible in moments of conflict and in the contradictions that subjects experience and encounter in their daily lives. In particular, at the moment when an individual confronts an event or finds themselves in a social interaction that shakes their moral certainties, leading them to question and renegotiate these according to a subjective ethical logic (Zigon 2007; Alunni 2013; Fassin 2014; Vacchiano 2021). According to Zigon (2007), this is the moment when the “moral rupture” occurs between moral norms, understood as institutionalised norms disseminated by actors who hold power, and ethical norms, which result from each individual’s conscious reflection and challenge customs (Fassin 2014; Foucault 2014).

Building on McGuire’s (2008) distinction between the physical body and the social body, the interviews reveal where these two aspects intersect. The first, closely tied to the subjective experience of one’s own body, reflects personal identity and faith. The second, originating from the physical body, also involves social expression and morality, as well as self-judgments that influence how individuals perceive and project themselves onto others. In particular, the expression of spirituality passes through the body, through the practice of the rituals prescribed by Islam. These rituals also, and above all, involve adopting a specific attitude and wearing particular clothing, making the girls feel more or less devout, but also more exposed to social judgment. In particular, it is important to consider the symbols through which individuals communicate within social interactions, thereby conveying meanings that encompass the moral norms prescribed and disseminated by social institutions.

For example, the issue of the veil for Muslim women is an important symbol that expresses their devotion through the *hasham*. Similarly to Mahmood (2005), Abu-Lughod (2016), when discussing the meaning of the veil in Awlad ‘Ali society, highlights that it is part of a “vocabulary item in a symbolic language for

communicating about morality” (Abu-Lughod 2016, 165). This falls within an ideological system “reproduced by the actions of individuals motivated by a desire to embody the good – that which wins respect, confers respectability, and allows for self-respect” (Abu-Lughod 2016, 167). Indeed, linked to respectability in wearing the veil, Lolita shared the fact that her neighbours (whom she calls “*shab dīn*”, namely “friend of religion”) make her feel like *mamziyanāsh* (“not good”) and *mamrabbiāsh* (“uneducated”) because they often make her feel judged for not wearing the veil, frequently asking her questions and reminding her that she should do so. Lolita grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in a suburb of Casablanca, and, like Siham, she is still studying at secondary school. Conversely, she comes from a less privileged background: her mother is a housewife, and her father is unemployed after losing his job as a labourer in the paint industry, and they live in a precarious socio-economic situation. During our conversation, she was also joined by a friend of hers who is one year older and lives nearby. Her name is Huda, and she wears the veil. In fact, she intervened, saying that these girls judge her for the way she wears her *ḥijāb*, for the fact that she wears short-sleeved tops (religion requires full coverage of the limbs), claiming that neither do her parents have these kinds of discussions with her.

These feelings and the judgment of being a “not ideal” girl are also addressed by Abu-Lughod (2016), who, in her ethnography of the Awlad ‘Ali, discusses the concepts of modesty and honour as they relate to sexuality, especially for females. Indeed, Lolita also talks about the conflicts she faces at home with her mother and brother. She mentions that after she turned ten years old, her parents told her to start *ṭhasham*, which means not dressing “*qsīr*” (short), wearing the veil, and limiting her outings. In this case, the term *ḥasham* is used as an action to be performed. I asked her to clarify the passage on her account, and she explained that a *drriya*, by the age of fourteen or fifteen, must dress *mstūr* (covered, modestly), meaning she should wear clothes that cover parts of her body that might attract attention or sexual desire. She mentions that at her house, even when her cousin visits, relatives advise her to dress modestly and *ḥasham* because otherwise, the boy

will stare at her. She confirms that she feels watched and prefers to dress modestly to avoid those looks. In this case, dressing modestly is not only a gesture of modesty and respect but also a protection against an unpleasant gaze.

In particular, in Abu-Lughod's detailed study, the principle of modesty and honour entails regarding independence and autonomy as virtuous and respectable conditions. Consequently, dependence is not well regarded and, since the sexual impulse can be difficult to control and may lead to dependency, it is perceived negatively – becoming central to the discourse on virtue. The risk that a man depends on a woman to satisfy his sexual desires would cause him to lose his honour, and in the same way, it would also apply to a woman who could benefit from such a dependent relationship. Furthermore, this dynamic would overturn the hierarchical order of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin society, threatening the existing social order. Specifically, women are more openly linked to sexuality than men because pregnancy reveals their sexual intimacy. Therefore, clothing symbols serve as a form of communication, expressing modesty, and this is reflected in the daily practices of those who wear them.

The existing power relationship between man and woman, and the power she can have over him by stimulating his sexual instincts, is also discussed by some girls, who find responsibility on both sides, but especially in the way a girl behaves and dresses. In fact, in continuing the conversation with Lolita and Huda, they mentioned that dressing in tight trousers, with loose hair and makeup “*darori kt ftni lrajel*” (“definitely attracts men”),¹⁰³ using non-verbal language of consent to look at her. According to them, if one dresses like that, guys immediately think she is a bad girl, judging her as a girl who “*ma'addash walidiha, mamrabbish*” (“has no parents, ill-mannered”).¹⁰⁴

It is interesting to see how the lack of *hsham* and the disregard for the moral values accepted by society and disseminated by the authorities translate into a judgment directed at the parents, education, and therefore the family, revealing the

¹⁰³ Informal conversation with Lolita and Huda. Casablanca, 30 June 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem.

legacy of family honour which, historically and for several generations, remains very much present in the values that shape Moroccan social order (Newcomb 2010; Abu-Lughod 2021; Menin 2024). Furthermore, it reveals the power dynamics and existing hierarchy by clarifying the family's authority and the school's role in educating and disseminating specific social principles, values, discourses, and norms (Bourdieu 1990).

Zahra offers similar examples, discussing perfume and suggesting that wearing it and passing by a man makes you seem desirable to him. She illustrates her point with an interesting analogy: "it's like when a dog sniffs and notices a fragrant chicken dish."¹⁰⁵ This emphasises how men are often seen as having difficulty controlling their sexual instincts and desire for women, thereby requiring the woman's contribution to avoid provoking them. Indeed, according to her, when a random man on the street desires a girl, it is because she has done something that attracts his attention (like perfume, makeup, or clothes that show off her figure), and therefore it is also the woman's fault. In fact, she argues that, according to the Qur'an and the *hadiths*, a man should look down when a woman passes by, as a sign of respect and deference towards her, but also as a means of self-control, granting him honour in return. For this reason, she contends that the Islamic religion has prescribed duties for both: "*howa mfrod 'lih y rad lbasār dyalo. Nti mfroda 'lik tlabsi lwa 'sah bash matactirish*" ("it is obligatory for him to lower his gaze. You (girl) are required to wear modest clothing so as not to attract"),¹⁰⁶ adding that she should also not wear makeup, perfume, or things that arouse a man's desires. For this reason, she continues by saying that, in her view, a man's education is important to control the instinct of desire.

The discussion among the interviewed girls emphasises the importance of the woman's body, her expressiveness, and the social order based on gendered encounters (Dwyer 1978; Namaane-Guessous 1991; Mattalucci 2012; Menin 2024). In this regard, Abu-Lughod (2016) highlights an interesting point: although

¹⁰⁵ Informal conversation with Zahra. Fez, 22 June 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

Islam broadly associates sexuality with impurity, particularly outside marriage, this attitude is not primarily rooted in Islamic teachings. Instead, it stems mainly from the tribe's social system, where family solidarity, blood ties, and patrilineality take priority. Applying this approach to the Moroccan context, it is equally possible to argue that these moral values, which can find a discursive basis in religion, also intersect with social ideals aimed at maintaining a particular balance. In fact, as previously argued, religion can be used as a narrative method to organise everyday events and social life (Geertz 1993). Indeed, Asad (1986b) spoke of a “discursive representation” of a given tradition, aimed at producing a specific representation and a particular form of knowledge, created through “regimes of authority” (Foucault 2014).

This discussion makes me think of Fauzia's comment about religious people who lack understanding of their faith, as if they are “wrapped in tradition more than in religion”.¹⁰⁷ She gives the example of a young man who does not pray but expects a woman to wear a veil. She specifically contends that, in her view, a boy like that, who concentrates solely on the girl's clothing and ignores her character and habits, is *jāhil* (ignorant – meaning he lacks understanding), because prayer, fasting, and being a good girl take precedence over the veil (Fauzia wears the veil). In fact, being *hashmāna* is connected to the concept of *'aql*, which refers to the ability to regulate one's instincts and needs, as well as to understand appropriate social behaviour (Rosen 1984; Dwyer 1978; Abu-Lughod 2016; Abenante 2010). This trait is valued by those who practice it and manifests in women through socially accepted, respectable behaviours that shape the “ideal woman” (Abu-Lughod 2016, 108), beyond veiling alone. Abu-Lughod (2016) discusses that “avoidance and self-effacing gestures, such as downcast eyes and restraint in eating, talking, and relaxing, are also key aspects of this specialised language of modesty” (165).

¹⁰⁷ Informal conversation with Fauzia. Fez, 04 July 2023.

Furthermore, during our discussion of the Moroccan context, Fauzia pointed out the diversity in how Islam is interpreted and practised, and made an interesting distinction between Islam *diyalna* (our) and Islam *jdīd* (new). When I asked her to explain more precisely what she meant by “new Islam”, she mainly referred to issues related to dress code, a woman’s body, and how she expresses herself through clothing when interacting with others. In particular, she observes that young girls today are comfortable showing their hair, wearing short dresses, and going out with boys. She emphasises that this new version of Islam is different from what was known in the past because these behaviours have become normalised, whereas before they were considered *hshwma*. While some still see these actions as inappropriate, there is also an awareness that times are evolving, accompanied by feelings of surprise and judgment (Salime 2007; Schielke 2009; Menin 2024). In fact, she gives another example, mentioning a woman who, fifty years ago, would not leave her house, but now she does because she needs to work or go out in general. Previously, it was considered *hshwma* for a woman to go out, but now it’s different – as if a small door has opened for us. She also remarks that “it is as if we have started to adopt European ways of thinking”, explaining that European culture is beginning to influence them in various ways – through food, language (such as Arabic and French words), and clothing. She ends with a joke, saying, “‘*ayshīn fl Maroc mashi fl Maghrib*’”.¹⁰⁸ From these last observations, it also emerges that the issue of clothing and social order between men and women is part of an identity discourse that recognises itself in values, principles, habits, and beliefs, which the interviewees often associate with Islam (Mahmood 2005; Mattalucci 2012; Menin 2024).

The term *hshwma* is often used in our conversations and in Moroccan social contexts. As Abu-Lughod (2016) observed in her work on the Awlad ‘Ali, the term changes meaning depending on the context in which it is used and is linked to the power dynamics present in society. In Arabic dictionaries, words that possess the

¹⁰⁸ Informal conversation with Fauzia. Fez, 04 July 2023.

root *hsh* also include terms such as modesty, shame, and shyness. Nevertheless, as we saw above, it is not possible to assign a single, definitive meaning to it, as it depends on the social, historical, and geographical context, but above all on the specific circumstances and the everyday usage (Abu-Zahra 1970; Abu-Lughod 2016). As Abu-Lughod (2016) discusses, among the various grammatical forms, the term *hashama* can have two poles of meaning, referring to both internal states and ways of acting. Therefore, the first is identifiable as involuntary emotions, while the second is “a voluntary set of behaviours conforming to the ‘code of modesty’” (Abu-Lughod 2016, 108). Lolita used the term *hshwma* mainly to describe behaviours during social interactions, both within her community and family. Specifically, her mother’s advice to avoid going out frequently, dress modestly, and wear a veil pertains to social judgment and to conforming to the “code of modesty.” Indeed, as Lolita and Huda share, if a girl adopts a certain type of behaviour that can be considered *hshwma*, the judgement extends to her family as well, affecting her family’s honour and casting doubt on their ability to raise a daughter with ‘*aql*. In fact, even from the stories shared by the girls, the issue of sexuality often emerges, manifesting through the body and the encounter between gendered bodies, thus involving gender relations – imbued with power dynamics (Mattalucci 2012; Menin 2012, 2024).

In Fauzia’s example, I find it interesting how the “registers of authority” change over time; what *hshwma* meant yesterday is not the same as what it represents today. The symbolic meanings have changed, demonstrating that the discourses behind norms and religious values, like other social constructs (e.g., culture), are susceptible to historical change (Asad 1986b; Geertz 1993; Abu-Lughod 2008). For instance, nowadays it is no longer considered shameful for a woman to leave the house to work; it has been normalised by society. However, debates around sexual relations outside marriage and social interactions between men and women remain significant, especially concerning notions of deference and modesty. These topics often appear as contradictions in important discussions – some judge these behaviours as *hshwma*, while others recognise the historical

context and consider alternative discourses. Indeed, globalisation has had a significant impact: through tourism, the Moroccan diaspora worldwide, and the spread of social media, ideas circulate and cross the globe much more quickly and more deeply (Salih 2002; Tozy 2009; Zaid et al. 2022). Moreover, the legacy of colonisation continues to shape the Moroccan government's political and economic choices to this day (Laroui 1977; Hibou 2006; Loimeier 2013). The changes are most evident in intergenerational conflicts; indeed, it would be interesting to conduct a more in-depth study of this.

There are several anthropological and sociological studies and approaches to love and intimacy, including those by Cole and Thomas (2009) and Decker (2015), who "[...] conceptualized love as a complex cultural and historical phenomenon, shaped at the intersection of socioeconomic and political developments [...]" (Menin 2024, 6). This means that no matter how intimate and personal love may be, it is also susceptible to influences from the surrounding context, which is why approaches to romantic and sexual relationships change across generations. In this regard, Doha highlights that Muslims, particularly the youth, are experiencing spirituality in a new way. Like Fauzia, Siham, Lolita, Huda and Noura, she considers the topic of sexual relations outside marriage significant for addressing contradictions within her Islamic community. She emphasises that most of those involved are young people seeking a specific experience, driven by their emotional nature. Despite this being regarded as a serious sin, they still identify as Muslims because they pray five times daily. She points out that some Muslim individuals observe ritual practices such as prayer and fasting but do not necessarily act in accordance with spiritual and ethical principles – emphasising the challenge of integrating faith, belief, and daily actions.

In line with this discourse and similarly to Fauzia, Siham also distinguished between a Muslim "*ḥaqiqi*"¹⁰⁹ and a non-Muslim. In defining the latter, she describes them as those who claim to be Muslim but do not pray, engage in sex

¹⁰⁹ Informal conversation with Siham. Fez, 26 March 2023.

outside marriage, steal, behave badly towards others, judge, or drink alcohol. Therefore, a true Muslim does not do any of these things, thus emphasising the importance of believing in God and the Prophet, and of following the teachings of the Qur'an – practices that Fauzia identifies in "our Islam". Siham, like Fauzia, was born and raised in Fez and belongs to a middle-class family living on the outskirts of the city.

What I find important is that these contradictions, which they observe and often experience firsthand, lead to conflict and the "moral rupture" (Zigon 2007). This process causes the girls to question certain moral certainties, encouraging them to explore, doubt, and renegotiate these beliefs as they develop their own ethical perspectives. In fact, as previously discussed, being part of a community also involves confronting ideological and moral conflicts that inevitably arise within a group, as a social body composed of a plurality of subjectivities with individual experiences. This plurality is even stronger in relation to the conception of bodies and sexuality, also because, in a globalised world within which narrative boundaries are increasingly blurred, discourses on ethics, values, faith, spirituality, love, intimacy, and sexuality meet, intersect, and clash with each other; changing and readjusting themselves to time, place, and the subjectivities that experience them (Rebhun 1999; Ahearn 2001; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Padilla et al. 2007; Mahmood 2009; Abu Lughod 2021; Menin 2024).

The interviews reveal that they assess their own devotion by how closely they follow certain prescriptions (such as wearing the veil or praying). They also reinterpret or justify behaviours that may appear to deviate from moral norms, while still maintaining ethical consistency. We will explore this aspect in more depth in the next chapter. From these steps onwards, it will already be possible to notice the complexity of Moroccan society, as well as the girls' beliefs and the Islamic discourse. Indeed, it also emerges that it is difficult to draw precise boundaries between moral and ethical norms (Zigon 2009), that subjective ethics is inevitably influenced by institutionalised morality, and that, from the same sources, a multitude of diverse narratives flourish, highlighting the intersection

between the two discourses and maintaining and reproducing power dynamics that are in constant challenge and negotiation.

2.5. Conclusions

As discussed in the introductory chapter, a society comprises various institutions that disseminate “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980) to establish and maintain a social order grounded in specific power relations. In this case, the dissemination of “discursive traditions” (Asad 1986b) that derive legitimacy from sacred scriptures is conveyed by spokespersons such as the family and the State. The latter acts both through religious figures authorised to spread “the truth” and through the educational system.

Most girls reported that their initial exposure to Islam occurred within their families, where they observed their parents practising prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. On several occasions, they also refer especially to the celebrations of festivals such as the Sacrifice Feast (*Al-Adḥa*) and the end of Ramadan (*Al-Fiṭr*). Indeed, it emerges that growing up in a family environment where the parents practice and share Islamic rituals and values influences the socialisation of girls. For example, from Farida’s story, it appears that her father, although identifying as Muslim, does not practise the rituals, while her mother does and transmits the values to her, but not as an educational priority.

From stories shared by other girls, even though Islam was not a priority, simply practising the rituals seemed to be significant, as a matter of mimesis/passive assimilation. However, at the same time, as Alia’s story recounts, an overly explicit religious education, such as the father’s request to wear the veil, can have the opposite effect: rejection of religion, but also of faith. In fact, although I will explore this topic in detail in the third chapter, several passages narrated by the girls show that freedom of choice is important and significantly influences spirituality and faith.

In fact, formal education was another major institution that encouraged girls to engage with Islam. Specifically, the subject of *tarbiya islāmiyya* at school, based

on their experiences, either strengthened their understanding of the religion they had started learning at home or led them to distance themselves, sparking their first doubts about the spiritual importance of learning it at school. On this last point, Farida shared her experience with Islamic education, which she found uninformative, overly legalistic, and lacking spiritual value. Noura also spoke about an approach to transmitting values and teaching Islamic sources that was very sterile and schematic, also lamenting a sense of helplessness and oppression when she asked specific questions. In particular, her story highlights a conflict she considers generational and reminiscent of an oppressive situation, in which specific actors have the authority to disseminate truths and information that, in her view, they themselves do not primarily know. This specifically refers to her mother and teachers, but she also complains that other institutions possess this power, namely, religious scholars such as *shuyūkh* and *a'imma*. Conversely, Isra', Siham, Fauzia, and Alia described how, during school, they had the chance to find meaning and significance in the practices observed in their parents, relatives, and community. For some, it served as an opportunity to further explore their personal spiritual paths, inspired by the *ḥadiths* discussed in class and Qur'anic verses, as was the case for Siham and Alia.

Therefore, it has emerged that family and school attempt to establish “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980), thereby defining actors such as parents, teachers, religious figures, and specific sources capable of producing what is considered “true”. From generation to generation, the legitimacy of their authority has become increasingly solid and recognised within Moroccan society, shaping the current social order. Despite this, the records and the methods they disseminate are beginning to be questioned and renegotiated by some girls (Bulter 2002; Salih 2002; Vacchiano 2021), who highlight a “moral rupture” (Zigon 2007) more directed towards the spokesperson authorities than the values themselves, but who previously called for a questioning of moral certainties, enough to identify their own ethical values (Foucault 1982, 2014; Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Vacchiano, 2021; Fassin 2014). In fact, as Vacchiano (2021) also states, it is

through the observation of these “registers of authority” that the power dynamics present in the lives and contexts in which the girls live emerge. Indeed, from this initial step, it is possible to identify a hierarchy of power that still regards the school and the family as legitimate institutions for disseminating knowledge and, therefore, the moral norms contained within the discursive tradition of the dominant and orthodox religion (Foucault 1980; Asad 1986b; Bourdieu 1990; Vacchiano 2021).

Referring to a *ḥadith* of the Prophet Muhammad, most girls consider themselves Muslim from birth, as a “natural predisposition”. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Isra’, Doha, Siham, and Fauzia, it is very important that this faith is nurtured over life through rituals, study, and knowledge of Islam, so that it becomes a spiritual faith and not merely a set of “material” acts or purely ideological.

At the same time, the identification with being Muslim also varies from girl to girl. For example, Doha considers herself a “true” Muslim because she feels a strong connection with God both during prayer moments and in her daily routine. For Siham, in addition to regular prayer, there are virtues such as patience and moods like the fear of God, as well as behaviours like not drinking alcohol, not having sexual relations outside marriage, not gossiping or speaking badly of others, and not stealing. Unlike them, Farida considers herself non-religious, but she emphasises that being Muslim goes beyond practising rituals such as prayer and fasting during Ramadan and concerns an attitude of respect and education.

On the other hand, quite interestingly, Fauzia and Alia, in addition to discussing the aforementioned rituals and reading the Qur’an, also regard being Muslim as a core part of their identity that they find hard to abandon. Indeed, it is interesting to observe how religion has a strong potential to shape identity through symbols that give meaning to the surrounding social world (Geertz 1993; Mahmood 2005, 2009; McGuire 2008; Vacchiano 2021). Finally, Noura describes herself as Muslim because, for her, Islam is meaningful and realistic, and she finds in it a narrative that coheres with her perception of the world. In particular, she

emphasises the rationality she has found in the *kalām* of *Allāh* in the Qur'an and how this has led her to believe more in Islam than in Christianity or Judaism. Her reflections will be analysed in depth in the third chapter.

The girls often spoke of a sense of *raḥa* (relief) when practising religious rituals, such as praying, listening to the Qur'an, or going to the mosque. In particular, imagining oneself in the afterlife in Paradise and the connection with God lead them to experience positive emotions in their daily lives and in how they face life, providing "psychological comfort". Doha talks about God's tolerance and, above all, the possibility of a direct connection with Him, with whom one can vent and confess one's sins; this helps strengthen her faith, precisely because she finds in it the spiritual potential that makes her feel good.

Tolerance in a broad sense and patience are virtues that even Farida recognises, admitting that she feels spiritual even though she is not faithful to the Muslim religion, but also acknowledging the potential of believing in a God and, like her, highlighting that she believes religion is helpful to have the possibility to vent and speak with a higher entity that makes you feel accepted and listened to. In fact, Zahra also recognises this potential for psychological relief, asserting that "religion helps to remove depression" precisely because she feels supported by it in all areas of life. Indeed, Siham emphasises that moments of prayer bring you closer to God and allow Him to give you more than you ask for.

Key points reveal that religion touches the deepest aspects of a person, spanning psychological and spiritual dimensions. Its potential also includes engaging with oneself – one's will, pain, and goals – and allowing moments to speak, vent, and seek forgiveness from God. These moments act as dialogues with one's conscience, fostering greater awareness of personal needs and emotions. This internal dialogue exists at the intersection between the norms and moral values passed down by dominant institutions and the ethical norms the girls choose to adopt. Indeed, in the practice of prescribed rituals and in the meaning of the world, through the orthodox Islamic discursive tradition, they also find a balanced

and logical sense that provides them with a unique relief, often essential for facing life's hardships.

In fact, besides faith in God's omnipotence, creation, and mercy, trust in *qadar* (destiny) and the assignment of meaning to life's events – especially during vulnerable moments – are also crucial. In particular, recognising *khīr* (good) in pain helps interpret tragedies positively, providing strength and aiding in progress. As Doha, Zahra, Isra', and Siham note, when an event is scheduled but does not turn out as expected, it's likely because God has something better in plan, offering them the opportunity to accept it with minimal suffering. This mindset – trusting in God's will – can provide comfort during tense moments, emphasising that the main focus should be on doing the best, while leaving the outcome in God's hands.

Zahra and Siham also share how this attitude has given them immense relief and a sense of purpose, even following their significant bereavements. For Zahra, it was the loss of her mother when she was three years old that led her to explore more deeply the themes related to Islam, which convinced her to wear the *khimār*. Her faith in Islam has been a salvation that has provided her with emotional and psychological strength, and she feels grateful to God for it. Siham lost her little brother when she was ten years old, and in this tragic episode, she tries to find a meaning in it, a narrative that suggests that if her brother had survived, he might have caused other types of suffering. Therefore, in most of their stories, the potential of faith and spirituality, as expressed in Islam through trust in God's will, emerges, which has prescribed a designated destiny for the well-being of the faithful. This symbol allows one to cultivate patience and gratitude, rediscovering a strong sense of relief, serenity, peace, and harmony with the surrounding world and with one's own emotions.

Furthermore, the significance of belonging to the Muslim community, the *Ummah*, is also highlighted by the girls' interviews. Sharing common values, goals, principles, worldviews, and ways of finding purpose in life strengthens the feelings of relief and gratitude previously noted. This is particularly clear during rituals such as prayer, *ṣadaqa*, and Ramadan, when the community of believers

comes together to connect and support one another. Inevitably, social interactions can lead to moments of conflict that showcase the community's diversity and demonstrate how the same symbol can hold multiple meanings and values (Geertz 1993; El-Zein 1977; Landry 2010). For example, the interviewees themselves reveal different ways of experiencing, interpreting, and valuing them. In particular, the importance of feeling part of a community and the pleasure of sharing experiences and emotions with family and close friends stand out. For instance, Farida recounts how important the month of Ramadan is to her, as it allows her to share moments of conviviality with her family, celebrate together during religious festivals, wear the *takshīta*, and feel connected to them and the Muslim community. In sharing her experiences, she highlights how Islam is, for her, "culture" and that, for this reason, during festive moments like these, she feels a sense of ancestral belonging. Indeed, religion, as a cultural system, is also discussed by Geertz (1993), who recognises its potential as a narrative composed of symbols that are historically and geographically meaningful, useful for organising society and giving meaning to life and the world. Farida's experience, as she is not spiritually involved, thus highlights the roots and social function of religion.

Alia and Fauzia, in addition to sharing the same emotions experienced by Farida during Ramadan and the festivities with family and sharing meals with neighbours, also talk about praying together with the *Ummah*, in the mosque and in the *msalla* during *ʿĪd al-Adḥa* and *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr*. Fauzia speaks of *salam dakhili* (inner peace), referring to the emotion she feels during these moments of gathering among the faithful, noting joy, solidarity, and mutual support, which make her feel increasingly connected to her faith in Islam, which she describes as the "religion of happiness". Furthermore, from the stories and sharing of Zahra, Siham, and Doha, the importance of the principle of solidarity and mutual support in Islam emerges. In particular, *ṣadaqa* and *zakāt* are often mentioned; the latter being one of the five pillars of Islam. This financial support, given annually to the most needy and aimed at rebalancing economic disparities, is experienced very powerfully by

the girls, who refer to the *ḥadiths* that encourage solidarity, support, altruism, and communitarianism. From this also arises the ideological basis on which Islam is founded, namely communal individualism (Lahbabi 1964), whereby individuals must care for their own body and psyche through devotion to God, also expressed through support, help, and the well-being of others, particularly the *Ummah*.

From this, what McGuire (2008) defines as “intersubjective experience” emerges, connecting the “spiritual consciences” of individuals as bodies and minds come into contact through religious rituals and spirituality. By sharing these experiences, caring for one another, and strengthening community bonds, emotions and feelings of well-being are triggered, reinforcing the “group feeling” (Issawi 1950; Ibn Khaldun 1958; Gellner 1961; Abu-Lughod 2016). The sense of belonging to a community is essential to overcoming loneliness and individualism, which the neoliberal socio-economic system is increasingly spreading. In fact, the awareness of shared values, symbols, behaviours, ideas, beliefs, languages, and feelings strengthens the girls’ sense of well-being and makes them feel more connected to their faith in *Allāh*.

Despite this, living and interacting with other people in increasingly complex societies also involves clashing over interpretations, attributions of meaning, attitudes, and ideas. These conflicts often emerged from conversations with the girls, all of whom identified a gap between what being Muslim means to them in line with Islamic values and what they encounter in social interactions with the community, as well as with their own family. Within the scope of an anthropological analysis, observing moments of conflict and contradiction that arise in individuals’ daily discourses and behaviours highlights existing power dynamics. In particular, one can observe the “moral rupture” (Zigon 2007) that emerges in a person’s experience when they confront episodes or people that lead them to question their moral certainties, prompting them to renegotiate, accept, or find ethical alternatives to the dominant moral norms (Fassin 2014; Foucault 2014; Vacchiano 2021).

The body, understood both as an individual physical entity and a social construct, serves as the medium through which these conflicts and power dynamics are expressed. This occurs both by unconsciously reproducing norms, behaviours, relationships, emotions, values, and socially reproduced hierarchical norms (*habitus*) and through the exercise of personal power that reflects spirituality, faith, and individual critique. In fact, through the body, girls can express their subjectivity, devotion, and spirituality by practising the rituals prescribed by Islam. In doing so, they adhere to socially accepted “symbolic languages” that communicate moral meanings. A clear example is clothing, particularly the way girls dress, whether they wear the veil, and how they relate to boys. Indeed, the topic of sexuality and sexual relations outside marriage is central to the discourse on moral norms that govern gendered social interactions, as a measure of individuals’ independence and autonomy (Dialmy 1988; Namaane-Guessous 1991; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Mattalucci 2012; Menin 2024). As Abu-Lughod (2016) observed in her study of the Awlad ‘Ali, respect, through the *hasham*, is also a central moral virtue in the accepted social order among Moroccan Muslim communities. Of course, this is not a generalisable discourse, but, in its complexity, it has emerged from various accounts. For example, when Lolita recounts that once she became more mature, her mother and brother asked her to dress *mstūr*, even in front of her curious cousin’s gaze. Or, at the moment when, together with her friend Huda, she shares the judgment that their neighbours have towards them because of the way they dress, emphasising that they make her feel *mamziyanāsh* (“not good”) and *mamrabbiāsh* (“uneducated”). Or, when they talk about the judgment that boys might have towards a girl who dresses and behaves in a way to “attract men”, defined as a girl who *ma‘addash walidiha*, *mamrabbiāsh* (has no parents, ill-mannered).

From here, the importance of the community’s judgment and the link between their behaviours and the honour of the family and parents also emerge. Furthermore, it is possible to identify the ideological basis of the social structure, according to which, through the desire to do good, one can gain relief for oneself,

admiration from others, and therefore respect – from which also derive the standards of the “ideal woman” (Abu-Lughod 2016). Furthermore, this power dynamic emphasises the behaviours, symbols, values, thoughts, and relationships that reinforce the hierarchical power structures in Moroccan society, which are transmitted through socialisation (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992). This socialisation is primarily carried out by family and educational institutions, making them equally accountable for shaping individual attitudes. In fact, it is important to emphasise that, as Abu-Lughod (2016) also observes, although the impurity of sexuality and social relations between genders are associated with Islam, the persistence of these attitudes and discourses also has a social basis and is inherited from an ancestral social structure, based on blood ties, patrilineal and tribal. In fact, it was also interesting to rediscover the girls’ awareness of a gap between what they find in religious and spiritual discourse and what is merely inherited from traditional social customs, as Fauzia explicitly notes. Indeed, it has also emerged from Farida’s account and other stories that neglecting prayer, consuming alcohol, and behaving in certain ways – such as having sexual relations outside marriage – can call into question one’s “Muslim status”. Specifically, she recounts her father not praying and drinking alcohol, admitting that she initially thought he was not Muslim.

Furthermore, many argue that these attitudes are in contradiction with the values on which Islam is founded and, most importantly, with the duties prescribed within it. Indeed, several girls comment on and judge these orientations, finding themselves making distinctions between a Muslim *ḥaqiqi* or not, as Siham says, or between “our Muslim” and “new Muslim”, as Fauzia recognises. The latter provides a couple of examples to highlight how the concept of *ḥshwma* – which can have different meanings depending on the context – has evolved over time. These examples include behaviours such as not wearing the veil, not dressing in covering clothes, and going out with boys, particularly for a Muslim girl. These actions are now normalised and thus lead her to see this as a “new Islam” influenced by “European ways of thinking”. Doha also mentions this shift, noting

that today's young Muslims experience spirituality differently, giving the example that it is now common for them to have sexual relations outside marriage.

Thus, the complexity of the Moroccan context emerges, as does that of the group of girls who have chosen to share their perspectives, experiences, and stories. From their accounts, it becomes clear how the *habitus* reproduced by family and school has had varying influences on each of them, who then internalised the values and interpretations learned, expressing and living them in diverse ways. Islam remains, nonetheless, an ideological foundation for maintaining social order and the hierarchies within it, as well as for peaceful coexistence aimed at cultivating individual and personal strength connected to the supernatural, as well as solidarity and bonds within the community – all through spirituality. These bonds can be challenged through encounters with others, and the girls' stories suggest that interactions with the opposite gender are decisive in maintaining a peaceful and positive balance. Respect for the “code of modesty”, through the symbolic language of the body and how it is displayed, is central to the structural basis of Moroccan society. Despite this, although many discourses highlight the importance of moral norms transmitted by authorities, it is also true that the heterogeneity and alternative discourses proposed by the girls highlight free will, rationality, and agency which also lead them to renegotiate certain behaviours and norms, proposing reformulations and transformations that are ethically coherent with their Islamic “discursive traditions” (Asad 1986b; Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Fassin 2014; Vacchiano 2021; Menin 2024).

CHAPTER 3. CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING: EPISTEMIC AND ETHICAL AGENCY

3.1. Introduction

As we discussed in the previous chapter, religion can be understood as a “discursive tradition” reproduced by multiple actors, with different interpretations and objectives. Inevitably, as in most social relationships, there are hierarchies of power, within which institutions tend to monopolise and disseminate dominant discourses – reproducing the same stratified order (Gramsci 1948; Foucault 1980, 1982; Bourdieu 1990). Nevertheless, since religion is also a system of symbols to which a plurality of meanings can be attributed, there are discourses and interpretations that diverge from the dominant ones, leading to a multitude of discourses, actions, thoughts, and subjective visions (El-Zein 1977; Geertz 1993; Asad 1986b; Marcotte 2010). In fact, the geographical and historical context, combined with individual experiences and ongoing global changes, has produced and continues to produce heterogeneous meanings and discourses that interact with the dominant ones (Eickelman 1982; Schielke 2009; Vacchiano 2021). From this, it is possible to observe various scenarios in which individuals provide daily support, negotiate, engage in conflict, and act, thereby shaping the power dynamics within that society, enacting their agency (Foucault 1982; Mahmood 2005; Menin 2024).

In this chapter, I will observe how a multitude of interpretations, reactions, and discourses emerge from the conflicts previously reported and discussed, which the girls put into practice to negotiate and re-balance what they feel, reflect upon, and consider ethically logical, both within and against the moral norms within which they have been socialised. From this, the complexity of the narratives of the Islamic religion, Moroccan society, and, more generally, of the human being will emerge. Furthermore, it will be possible to observe the difficulty of creating analytical discourses confined to discursive realities with vague or absent boundaries and in continuous change.

3.2. *Baḥth*

Baḥth signifies “research” and “study”, and many of the girls interviewed highlight the importance of nurturing their faith and deepening their understanding of religious matters through their own research – in addition to what they learned through socialisation at home and at school – thereby enacting epistemic agency. Each one expresses it for different reasons and objectives: from those who emphasise it as a prescribed duty to be a good Muslim, to those who recognise its logicity in knowing what they believe in to deepen their spirituality or not, up to those who share it as the only means to free themselves from pre-established orders and hierarchies, often considered “ignorant” and not faithful to the principles of Islam. Awareness is a weapon that confers considerable psychological and social power, as it enables girls to make choices and take positions that would otherwise be unquestioned and passively absorbed (Foucault 2014; Mahmood 2005; Salime 2007). In fact, Farida shares the idea that, in order to have a critical view of what is taught by parents and at school, it is necessary and important to conduct personal inquiry, search the internet, read books, and trace back the sources and discourses that have been taught to you and that society reproduces. According to her, this is the only way to escape the relations of domination present in the society in which she lives, which often falls into ignorant discourses that have nothing to do with Islam, but rather with “culture”,¹¹⁰ as she said. Furthermore, emphasising the importance of one’s critical, individual, and subjective positioning and reasoning about it, she discusses the issue of the *ḥijāb* and the differing opinions and interpretations among Sunni scholars on the matter. In fact, she emphasises that many scholars online interpret wearing the *ḥijāb* as a *Sunna* – meaning a saying and custom of the Prophet practised by women of his era. However, it is not considered obligatory, though it is seen as a sign of deference, respect, and virtue.

¹¹⁰ As discussed previously, also in this context, we could interpret “culture” as historical, geographical, and social traditions passed down from generation to generation through socialisation processes and reproduced daily by individuals (*habitus*).

Conversely, other scholars believe it is a duty because the Qur'an mentions the importance of not exposing specific parts of the body to women and men.¹¹¹

Once again, the complexity and plurality of interpretations of Islamic sources emerge, as do the different perceptions and considerations by the competent authorities in the dissemination of a dominant narrative (Asad 1986b; Marcotte 2010). In fact, as discussed earlier, the historical and technological changes and Morocco's geographical position allow for receiving numerous inputs and stimuli from surrounding societies, but also for expanding possible imaginaries and, consequently, generating narratives that differ from one another, which can coexist with the dominant one (Tozy 2009; Loimeier 2013). Easy access to information via the internet and social networks serves as a key tool, often highlighted in girls' stories, enabling them to inform themselves and engage with diverse forms of human expression (Zaid et al. 2022; Menin 2012, 2024). They are also aware of this; in fact, Fauzia believes that religion has been heavily influenced by social media and the "waves" of surrounding non-Muslim societies. In particular, she gives the example of Egypt, which, in her opinion, conducts gender-mixed prayers during *ṣalāt al-ʿīd* because it has been influenced by abroad. She also adds that social networks have influenced our generation, referring also to the generational differences compared to our parents, emphasising the importance of the easy accessibility of information, as well as exposure to other social habits and traditions, taking food, clothing styles, and music as examples, and states that previous generations only knew what they had and what surrounded them as Moroccans. During our chats, Fauzia often referred to intergenerational clashes, sometimes even mentioning her mother as an example.

In fact, even in her studies, Menin (2012, 2024) discusses how the advent of technologies, satellite TV, and the Islamic Revival has influenced the younger generations of the new millennium. The interpretative forms of reformist Islam

¹¹¹ The sources are considered central because the Qur'an is the primary source within which God's *kalām* resides and is therefore inviolable, while the *ḥadīths* – as narrations that aid in the interpretation of the Qur'an, although highly authoritative for the Sunni Muslim community – are sometimes regarded as a secondary source.

have provided new ways of being Muslim, both individually and within society. This has also created space for new interpretative approaches that have widened the intergenerational gap, showing that young people are more aware of the principles and practices of Islam, which differ from those considered traditional customs expressed as religious but are, in fact, social and historical (Menin 2024). Farida explicitly acknowledges the influence of easy access to surrounding societies, whether consciously or not. Her speech and awareness reflect her educational background: she is pursuing a master's degree, and her parents are middle-class, with her father, who holds a degree, working as a French teacher.

Even Siham, though still a secondary school student, has a less critical and radical awareness, but she is aware of her available tools and the surrounding context. She also comes from a Moroccan middle-class family, but she was born and raised in Fez, which, as I mentioned earlier, is a symbolic city in Moroccan Islam and is home to influential religious institutions, such as al-Qarawiyyin University. When discussing the Qur'an, she mentioned she has not had the opportunity to memorise it yet and would love to, but she also recognised that it demands significant time and resources to study. In particular, she emphasises that to learn it, you also need to understand it, and to do so, you must conduct inquiry: studying the origins of the *sūra* (chapter), the context in which they are narrated, the reasons why each individual *āya* (verse) was revealed and, therefore, going in depth. To achieve this, she cites the Qur'an¹¹² saying "*iqra* ", namely "read, recite", understood as a call to one of the fundamental principles of Islam aimed at knowledge, reflection, and learning. To this end, Siham argues that to truly understand the Qur'an, she must search online for teachers and scholars who explain the deeper meaning of the *āya*, because she cannot comprehend what is written in the Qur'an and *ḥadiths*. In addition to the contextual factors mentioned earlier, these texts are written in classical Arabic and are difficult to understand at

¹¹² Al-'Alaq 96:1 (p.428). The first five verses of this *sūra* seem to have been the first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, in which God invites people to read and study. Indeed, the first word is "Read!" (Haleem 2004).

their deepest level. Furthermore, she adds that the more she researches and discovers Islam, the more faithful she becomes, because she realises how beautiful it is, once again exclaiming “*wAllah ra dīn diyalna ra bogoss!!*”.¹¹³ She, like Fauzia, was born and raised in Fez, but belongs to a higher social class, as both her parents are employed in a bank. As previously discussed, she often refers to her lower secondary school Islamic education teacher, who instilled in her curiosity and interest in Islam, which is significant for her relationship with it. Interestingly, many opt for an active, subjective search rooted in traditional, authoritative sources such as the Qur’an and *ḥadiths*. Nonetheless, their access to a wider range of resources enables them to explore alternative sources, thereby supplementing or challenging existing “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980), exercising their epistemic agency.

Doha, too, emphasises that understanding the Qur’an’s profound meaning requires the guidance of ‘*ulamā*’ to properly interpret its words and context. She explains that she truly felt Muslim when, beyond rituals like prayer, fasting, *du‘ā*, and helping others, she began exploring the deeper significance of the Qur’anic words and the meanings behind the rituals. She also mentions that this process was initially challenging for her, but her growing conscious spirituality eventually brought her greater relief and comfort. Doha, originally from the Eastern Region and a master’s student in Fez, has often expressed her sense of being a true Muslim, as demonstrated by her devotion, which includes wearing the veil, praying, and seeking to do good for the community.

Indeed, the practice of rituals, in addition to having a social and psychological bonding power, serves as both a means and an end to achieve the virtue of fidelity and deference. Furthermore, it allows for the expression of ethical agency, which, through bodily actions, enables contact with the surrounding reality (Mattalucci 2003; Mahmood 2005, 2012; McGuire 2008; Landry 2010; Foucault 2014). This passage highlights how awareness of these gestures and of the body’s involvement

¹¹³ Informal conversation with Siham. Fez, 26 March 2023.

in rituals deepens the sense of connection and enhances spirituality. Furthermore, through daily rituals driven by faith, actions become increasingly integral to the individual's behaviour, which they internalise and express through the smallest daily practical gestures (Lapidus 1984; Mahmood 2009).

In her inquiry, Doha does not deviate from the moral norms prescribed by the authoritative sources of Islam, but she still finds a space for dialogue within them, a space she has chosen and shaped through in-depth studies and practices that, over time, have become her personal refuge (Mahmood 2005; McGuire 2008). As indicated in the previous chapter, for Zahra, too, personal research and investigations on religion – which she was first taught by her father and later at school – have been crucial to her spiritual journey. Also, in this case, where she recalls that what helped her most in understanding was a knowledgeable Muslim woman who published videos on YouTube, it highlights how the internet and media play an equally significant role, providing access to alternative sources beyond official ones (Zaid et al. 2022). Zahra is one of the few girls interviewed who are still in secondary school with whom I have had the chance to speak. Her story is very impactful, since she lost her mother when she was a child and grew up in a family and socio-economic context that was unstable. The connection she has found with this woman on YouTube is significant both in her spiritual journey as a Muslim girl and in relation to the absence of a maternal figure – which she has somehow sought through the spiritual education of this woman.

Returning to Siham, who stressed the significance of *baḥṭh* more than anyone else in our discussion, she pointed out its importance not just for understanding the religion one is born into but also for gaining a deeper comprehension of it. She provided examples of individuals from Christian or Jewish backgrounds, emphasising that it is equally vital for them to explore their own origins and other faiths to find the religion with which they feel most aligned. Furthermore, revisiting the topic of Islam, she emphasises that the more it is explored, the more someone tends to like it, fostering a deeper connection and strengthening the *imān*. She frequently cites authoritative sources such as the Qur'an and *ḥadiths*, while

also encouraging the use of internet searches and the gathering of information from online resources in her shared stories. This approach to Islamic religious narration reflects her education in Fez's public schools during the early 2010s, grounded in the *Sunna* sources she learned at school and at home, and incorporating information from the World Wide Web.

Alia, who spent her early years in her grandfather's village, later moved to her parents' home, and eventually relocated alone to another city during adolescence to pursue her studies, highlighted that research played a crucial role in shaping her faith in Islam. Notably, after distancing herself from faith and religion, she reconnected with her beliefs, following further research into other monotheistic religions and a more thorough exploration of Islam. In the latter, she found the peace and relief she was seeking, but she emphasises that this only happened because she chose to approach it differently, with the awareness that it was not the only true religion but that others are true as well; in this way, she chose to practise Islam. Furthermore, she emphasises that it is essential for her to continue researching and discovering more, because she feels she can never know enough.

Fauzia, though expressing it less directly, believes it is important to understand one's religion, engage with others, and read and learn proper behaviour to avoid harming oneself or others. She suggests that if all Muslims had this attitude, there would be no selfish or evil individuals who steal or speak ill of others, leading to peaceful coexistence. She explains that, in her view, when someone studies religion – reading the Qur'an and the *ḥadiths* and grasping their deeper meanings – they dispel lies and distinguish between traditional societal discourses and religious teachings. This process helps to realise that Islam is genuine and understand why people are born into the Muslim faith. At the end of this speech, she adds: "*Qur'an matharafsh, afkār li ki ghairo m'a lwaqt, mashi*

ldīn” (“the Qur’an has not changed; it is the ways of thinking that change over time, not the religion”).¹¹⁴

She, like Doha, shows her devotion through her veil, which she regards as an essential part of her identity and cannot imagine living without. This reminder aligns with Mahmood (2009), who discusses the term *malaka* used by Ibn Khaldoun, particularly when addressing the issue of faith, understood as a belief that generates concrete actions and which, through practices and rituals, is internalised and strengthened, becoming a trait – sometimes subconscious – that reflects an individual’s faith (Lapidus 1984). In fact, it seems that the act of seeking and delving deeper is linked to the pursuit of ethical, subjective well-being, which provides a sense of order in the surrounding environment, ranging from moral to social. As repeatedly emerged from the interviews, a free and conscious search also leads to deeper introspection that, in most cases, strengthens spirituality and faith, which they themselves define as Islamic (Mahmood 2005, 2009; McGuire 2008). Furthermore, the conflict between their observations of the Muslim community and their beliefs arises both from the motivation to explore and from the results of that exploration. In fact, individual agency becomes a space where power dynamics are negotiated, making it a site of ongoing transformation (Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Schielke 2009; Foucault 2014).

Furthermore, Noura, based on her inquiry, shares her perspective regarding her conclusions. In particular, she discusses the idea of freedom within the framework of the three principles and the crucial conditions she considers fundamental to her faith: love, freedom, and conscience – which I will explore further. Her discussion of freedom is especially pertinent, as she states that genuine freedom begins with the capacity to question teachings, information, and societal norms rather than accepting them at face value, and to actively pursue understanding – unconsciously defining epistemic agency. For her, informing oneself, reflecting, and questioning are the core of freedom – values she also finds

¹¹⁴ Informal conversation with Fauzia. Fez, 04 July 2023.

echoed in the initial words of the Quran: “*Iqra*” (“Read!”)¹¹⁵ – as Siham also states. She further explains that “*lm ‘arifa fl Qur’an ‘and Allāh ra waḥd lmakana kbīra bzāf... linsān l ‘alīm, Rabbi ra ki ḥatto fwaḥd lmarsala ‘aliya.*” (“knowledge, according to the Qur’an, holds a place of great importance before *Allāh*... God elevates the human being who seeks knowledge to a high position”).¹¹⁶ Furthermore, she states that “*Allāh* chooses the right path”¹¹⁷ and emphasises that, in her view, if the *Ummah* had historically relied on the Qur’an, there would not have been a split between Sunnis and Shia. For this reason, she highlights that deepening her knowledge of Islam and having the opportunity to reflect on, embrace, and renegotiate it have led her to “reach my conclusions, feeling free, happy, and satisfied”.¹¹⁸ Noura is also in her final year of her master’s degree, and this level of education has inevitably influenced her approach to religion. Furthermore, as previously described, she also claims her Imazighen origins, arguing that their interpretation of Islam is more spiritual than dogmatic, and this will also be evident from her shares.

Therefore, even from Noura’s account, it is possible to summarise what has been discussed previously. That is, studying and reading individually also grant them the power to understand, become aware, and choose which narrative to adopt, either resisting or accommodating it. In fact, despite these “molecular” subjective and autonomous “transformations”, the encounter between moral norms and ethics remains contradictory and conflictual within a relationship of power that is constantly changing (Butler 2002; Pizza 2004; Mahmood 2005, 2009; Landry 2010; Mattalucci 2012; Abu-Lughod 2016). Furthermore, for Noura, the goals and purposes of her actions, situations, and emotions are closely linked to love, freedom, and consciousness, which are also understood as moods through which to achieve well-being that is consistent and connected to the surrounding world.

¹¹⁵ Al-‘Alaq 96:1 (p.428). The first five verses of this surah seem to be the first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, in which God invites to read. Indeed, the first word is “Read!” (Haleem 2004).

¹¹⁶ Informal conversation with Noura. Fez, 27 May 2023.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem.

As we also discussed in the previous chapter, it increasingly emerges that girls manipulate and utilise some narratives and orthodox sources of Islam (Lewellen 2003; Mahmood 2005), which allow them to find a balance between what they learn during socialisation within social institutions and what they then learn and choose to adopt during their individual and autonomous growth (Bourdieu 1990; Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007).

More or less, everyone is aware of these processes; in any case – given that most of the girls with whom I have managed to carve out moments of discussion on the subject – it emerges that the girls who tend to delve deeper and explore more interpretations are those who attend university. In any case, most of them refer to sources of Islam, particularly the Qur'an, as an essential starting point. It is also for this reason that their research takes on a spiritual and virtuous value, embracing and gathering a plurality of emotions, actions, and awarenesses. Similarly, Siham and Zahra are very aware of the importance of individual research and of questioning certain narratives, but their discourses remain largely confined to the dominant discursive traditions. Despite this, they have a very high level of awareness and contact with their emotions and the surrounding world, which leads them to live peacefully.

3.2.1. *Niyya*

Among the first things Fauzia emphasises is that, at fourteen, she chose to wear the veil after inquiry and reflection. Unlike Alia's interpretation, for her, the veil is a *fard* (obligation), but it must be worn with intention; otherwise, it would lose its essence of virtue. In fact, Fauzia considers the issue of *niyya* (deep intention) central: from the moment someone decides to act with intention, it becomes part of the self and expresses faith. For this reason, she has said several times that she likes it and cannot imagine herself without it. In some way, it is like what Khaldoun also said when he spoke of *malaka* in relation to faith (as cited in Lapidus 1984), and from the moment it originates from the heart, all actions are then performed with it and for this reason become an integral part of the person

who acts, doing good works – according to moral and ethical norms – in a spontaneous manner, thus making their devotion and virtue a characteristic quality of their person (Mahmood 2009). More specifically, Mahmood (2005, 2009) argues that for Muslim women, the veil becomes an ethical act of self-formation, building and conveying a range of emotions and conditions, such as modesty and chastity. Doha also refers to the time she put on the veil; she too chose to wear it at nineteen years and shared the moment when she asked her father if she should start wearing the veil, saying that he replied: “I cannot tell you whether to wear the veil or not. It is up to you. It is your own body, it is your own hair, and it is your own belief. It is you who will decide. It is all about your belief and your satisfaction.”¹¹⁹ She adds that she remained surprised by his answer, and one year after this exchange, she decided to wear the veil, highlighting how *niyya* played a decisive role in her comfort with it.

Returning to Fauzia’s shares, she was keen to provide examples centred around the issue of *tiqa* (trust). According to her, whether male or female, people are born into a family environment where trust is given, and therefore, they are not forced to do anything; the chances of freely embracing Islam in a more sincere and profound way are higher. One example she gives is a hypothetical boy who grew up with parents who did not trust him and perhaps even oppressed him, and she believes it is very likely that, as he grows up, he will behave badly towards those around him. She justifies this theory by saying that, in her opinion, this type of upbringing leaves a *ffwa* (gap/space) and a *farāgh* (void) of love, as well as frustration from being repressed, leading them to fill this void with painful acts, possibly even dependencies or irrational and *ḥaram* (forbidden) behaviours. She also gives the example of girls who cannot be free to dress and do what they want because their parents do not allow it, and, after seeing their classmates who can, they give free rein to their repressed desires as soon as they have the chance. This example refers to some of her classmates who, as soon as they arrived at school,

¹¹⁹ Informal conversation with Doha. Fez, 21 March 2023.

would take off their *khimār*, put on makeup, and dress as they pleased. She also shares the story of some of her secondary school classmates who dreamed of going to university so they could have the freedom to do whatever they wanted. Fauzia was born and raised in a working-class neighbourhood of Fez and attended the local schools, where several classmates were also her neighbours. This detail may be useful for understanding the socio-economic background of her schoolmates, who are presumed to be predominantly from lower social classes. In her speech, she stresses that when someone is forced to do something, the natural outcome is that they will do the opposite once given the opportunity, advocating for a more educational approach. Regarding religious practices, she suggests that parents should clearly explain the reasons behind certain behaviours or dress codes, rather than resorting to coercion.

Here she repeats, as she had already done, that those who do not educate in this way are, in fact, merely reproducing outdated practices, more linked to traditions than to religion understood in its spiritual sense. To the extent that, at a certain point, she claims that “*hwma ltaqlīd li ki qtl lIslām*” (“it is traditions that kill Islam”).¹²⁰ Precisely, because one of the core principles of Islam is the *niyya*,¹²¹ and without it, the bond and connection with God would not exist, and therefore, the entire aspect of faith and spirituality would cease, leaving only the more practical and apathetic side. In fact, as discussed in the first chapter, even Geertz (1993) recognises that the aspect of religion that captures moods, motivations, emotions, and stimuli from experiences falls within the realm of individuals’ intentionality, who practice it not out of mere convention, but for personal well-being. Similarly, Mahmood (2009) discusses how religious norms are seen as an essential part of the individual’s inner, subjective value system, thereby transcending the realm of social moral prescriptions and stirring feelings of faith that guide daily actions (Lapidus 1984). Within this discourse, the issue of ethical

¹²⁰ Informal conversation with Fauzia. Fez, 04 July 2023.

¹²¹ Volume 3, Book 46, Number 706: Narrated ‘Umar bin Al-Khattab: The Prophet said, “The (reward of) deeds depend on intentions, and every person will get the reward according to what he intends[...].” (Khan 2009, 576).

agency also plays an important role, as it establishes a connection between intentionality and ritual practice, allowing for the conscious enactment of rituals involving the body, the mind, and the surrounding reality (Mattalucci 2003; McGuire 2008; Mahmood 2005, 2009).

According to Noura, the *niyya* is a condition connected to faith and the relationship with God, but it also takes on different meanings depending on the context in which it emerged during our conversations. First of all, she speaks of *niyya* as the intention to carry out the religious practice, which emerged when she was discussing *ṣalāt* (prayer), at the moment when she explained that this word derives from *yaṣilw/waṣala* (reach, arrive, connect), thereby interpreting it as a connection with a person and with God. For this reason, concentration during this ritual is essential, as it requires recalling its intent and deep will.

Another context in which she uses the term *niyya* concerns the intentionality in the healing ritual that a wise Sufi man had directed towards her. Specifically, she recounts that when she was young, she had a skin disease that, despite being treated by various doctors and with numerous pharmacological treatments, could not be eradicated. So, they went to a *zāwiya* in her parents' homeland (Eastern Region) to ask if, with his *baraka* (benediction), he could help her to heal. In fact, she believed that this man was blessed by God, and she narrates that through the strong *niyya* he infused into reading specific Qur'anic verses for healing prayer, her dermatitis was cured. She further explains that, in her view, *niyya* here represents powerful positive energies and deep spirituality that fostered a connection with God, who truly intervened to heal her. So, in this case, the *niyya* is a means through which the wise man acquires *baraka* and, consequently, also trust and authority to perform this healing ritual, helping to strengthen Noura's faith and that of her family, which, given the results, confirms their vision and their faith in Islam and Sufi practices.

Furthermore, she defines *niyya* as “good intentions in general and good intentions towards others”¹²² and highlights that intentions inevitably vary from person to person. In this passage, she provides the example of how a caress or physical contact between a girl and a boy can be interpreted differently depending on the individual’s subjective *niyya*. In this case, however, although linked to the deep intention behind the action, the context is more related to interpersonal and social relationships, primarily concerning the socio-psychological mood with which a specific action is carried out.

Additionally, she mentions that she used to pray and make *du‘ā’* regularly when she was younger. However, she stopped at some point because she no longer felt that connection and prefers not to pray at all, rather than do it insincerely. Indeed, she stresses that the Qur’an states that faith cannot be forced and that each person must believe what they choose. Without this personal conviction, it would not be valid in Islam, because “*īmān khasso y koun out of love*” (“faith must be motivated by love”).¹²³ Noura is also in the final year of her master’s studies and was born and raised in a rural Imazighen environment – in the northern Fez-Meknès region, where the influence of urban religious authorities and “orthodox” narratives is less prevalent, and Sufi interpretations are more widespread – as I discussed in the historical chapter.

Additionally, alongside the concept of freedom as the foundation of her faith, she also finds the concept of love such that, in her view, every person who commits an act should do so with their heart and with love. This is because she believes that God created us “out of love”, and therefore we should do the same in our actions since human beings are created by God and thus represent what He created.

Finally, the third great principle of faith for Noura is the *dameer* (conscience), understood as the ability to recognise which circumstances, actions, and situations can harm you and those around you, without needing to consult the words of God in the Qur’an. Associated with it, therefore, is the importance of asking oneself

¹²² Informal conversation with Noura. Fez, 27 May 2023.

¹²³ Ibidem.

questions before acting in a certain way, and of being in touch with oneself and with the surrounding reality independently. Hence, she says that her decisions in life are guided by love, freedom, and conscience, arguing that where she does not feel free to perform a specific act, she would not do it; when she feels like doing something with her heart and with love, she would do it – without expecting anything in return or for a secondary purpose. When she refers to the latter, she also alludes to the imagery of Paradise and to the performance of a religious act or ritual aimed at reaching Paradise or avoiding Hell, regarding this attitude as a *rashwa* (corruption). She emphasises that what she does is done with desire and intentionality, highlighting her freedom in doing so. Indeed, as previously discussed, free will and individual intentionality are central elements in the reformulation, manipulation, and negotiation of religious narratives (Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Vacchiano 2021).

Lolita also highlights the importance of *niyya* in the faith and practice of Islam; in fact, she says that, at the moment, she does not feel ready to wear the veil, preferring to do so when she is older and genuinely has *niyya*. She also comments that “*y la bzzw ‘lk, mn li tkabri tqadri thaydih*” (“if they force you, when you grow up, you probably will remove it”).¹²⁴ In this case, *niyya* is linked to the issue of the veil and, in particular, to feeling fully ready and convinced to wear it. The question of whether to perform a religious act or ritual often arises in this narrative, bringing to the centre arguments about how each person experiences moral norms and, at the same time, how emotions and choices are intimate and subjective in the implementation of these practices (Lapidus 1984; Mahmood 2005, 2009). For this reason, it has also been possible to see, from Alia’s account after her father asked her to wear the veil, that in some cases there can also be a desire to distance oneself from a certain type of narrative or attitude, only to then renegotiate it and make it one’s own in an authentic and subjective manner.

¹²⁴ Informal conversation with Lolita. Casablanca, 30 June 2023.

According to Zahra, *niyya* is linked to the forces that come into play to enrich one's knowledge of religion, nurturing one's *īmān*, which, without intentionality and effort, would not increase and would not truly make one a Muslim. For Siham as well, the *niyya* is linked to awareness and the intentionality of feeling religion in one's heart. To do this, she believes that research is essential, but it is inevitably driven by the personal will to go deeper. Furthermore, she argues that religious rituals, especially *ṣalāt*, are primarily performed for ourselves – to establish a connection with God and seek what one desires. Based on this reasoning, it would be meaningless to perform these rituals merely as physical gestures without truly feeling them, as that would be practising the motions without engaging the heart and spirit. Zahra and Siham emphasise the role of faith and Islamic rituals, thereby relating the value and symbolism of *niyya* to religious spirituality and connecting it to their psychological state and physical actions through the ritual.

Both of them were born and raised in Fez, and are still studying in secondary school. While the first would, after a few months, have taken her final exams and expressed her intention to attend university, Siham is a bit younger, though she also expressed a desire to continue her studies after high school. The most significant difference, however, is that Zahra was born and raised in a more precarious socio-economic and emotional environment, living in a working-class neighbourhood with her father, a shoemaker, and her stepmother, a housewife. In contrast, Siham was born and raised in a neighbourhood, albeit peripheral and working-class, with a more stable socio-economic and emotional situation, with both parents employed at a bank. Their stories share an important common point: the grief over a loved one when they were a child – for Zahra, it was her mother, and for Siham, her younger brother, though these are two different figures, with different psychological repercussions. This is relevant here because these episodes, in different ways, have influenced their relationship with religion and their identity as Muslim girls.

3.3. (Re)interpretations

Alia shares that, following her decision to return to Islam, after conducting her personal inquiry and her journey of awareness, she has decided to consider the verses in the Qur'an as true and to attribute less confidence to the *ḥadiths*, because, having been transcribed by numerous scholars, only a few are considered reliable. She is sceptical about this because she says that sometimes she reads *ḥadiths* that are not true, whereas regarding the Qur'an, "you will never feel that there is anything wrong with it".¹²⁵ Additionally, she shares a reflection on not wearing the veil and, in particular, on the question she often asks herself: whether God truly punishes her for it. She emphasises that she fulfils all other obligations, namely prayer, fasting, and helping others, and wonders if God, with His mercy and greatness – as the creator of the universe and aware of all present evils – really makes a person suffer in Hell just because she did not wear the veil or, more generally, because she committed minor sins. She is not sure that those punishments are truly so harsh and universal, and she says, "If you are a good person, will you really be punished? I do not know..."¹²⁶ In fact, she explains that this narrative does not resonate with her, which makes her feel more at ease following her own spiritual path, focusing instead on specific rituals, behaviours, values, and norms.

Noura, like Alia, is also a bit sceptical about the *ḥadiths* because she recognises them as products of human, and particularly male, interpretations and narratives, and, as such, they are susceptible to error. Despite this, she recognises some as trustworthy and true, and in sharing her stance with me, she also shares a general principle she applies when consulting the Qur'an. In particular, she recounts that to answer the existential questions that troubled her, she chose to deepen her research by consulting scientific studies. Despite this, she realised that science also has its limits in answering certain types of questions and, moreover, that it is always changing as new research and discoveries emerge, keeping it in a

¹²⁵ Informal conversation with Alia. Fez, 13 April 2023.

¹²⁶ Ibidem.

state of constant evolution. For this reason, she understood that she preferred not to have faith in either science or *ḥadiths*, but when she needs to find certain and general answers, she consults the Qur'an, regardless of the interpretations of the *Sunna*. Moreover, to get a sense of what is *ḥalāl* (permissible) or *ḥarām* (forbidden), she consults the Qur'an, though she sometimes finds references that are vague or unclear. Anyway, as discussed before, she believes that God calls for “*ḥubb, ḥurriya w ḍamīr* (love, freedom, and conscience)”¹²⁷ and asserts that if she finds anything in the Qur'an that contradicts these three conditions and values, she does not believe it. Behind these thoughts lies a process of reasoning and questioning of the Islamic “regimes of truth”, such as the *ḥadiths*, which hold an authoritative position within Sunni Islam. However, according to Alia, Noura, and Farida, since *ḥadiths* are authored by scholars, they do not carry the same level of credibility and reliability as the Qur'an. It becomes evident that faith in the history of the Qur'anic revelation remains strong, but what occurs after the Prophet Muhammad's death is seen as less authoritative. This allows room for individuals to evaluate, interpret, and negotiate the orthodox narrative that has developed throughout Moroccan history and society.

Noura offers an interesting interpretation of how to connect with God during prayer, emphasising that it begins with *niyya* and communication with Him. She suggests that *ṣalāt* can be practised differently from the usual cyclical movements typical of Islamic prayers: simply beginning to communicate with God, without performing specific gestures, also constitutes *ṣalāt*. For example, she notes that saving a child from danger can be considered a form of prayer, as well as reading and studying, which may also be acts of prayer. With this discourse, she wants to emphasise that prayer is omnipresent; it does not depend on specific times, gestures, or locations.

Another interesting point she shares is that when the topic of *ḥajj* comes up, the last of the five pillars of Islam. According to her, *ḥajj* need not be performed

¹²⁷ Informal conversation with Noura. Fez, 27 May 2023.

in Mecca but can also be performed in nature. According to her interpretation, the journey she takes, during which she reflects on nature, observes it, and recognises the beauty of what God has created, is already *ḥajj*. For her, *ḥajj* is *ta'ammul* (meditation/contemplation/reflection): being with oneself, thinking, observing nature, and saying: “*Shoufi, Subḥan Allāh! Shoufi hadk ljbāl kifash dīr w shoufi hadk lflowar kifash dīr...* and I will return as a completely new person.” (“Look, glory to God! Look at that mountain and how that flower is made[...]).¹²⁸ Thus, she states that the meaning of *ḥajj* is to go on a journey to return as a new person. For this reason, she believes this journey can also be undertaken elsewhere, such as in nature. The important thing is to discover oneself, look at nature, and observe one’s surroundings. She thinks that going on *ḥajj* is unnecessary because there are people who have gone and come back unchanged. As previously described, Noura has Imazighen origins and is deeply connected to her roots and to the family living in the Rīf Mountains. In fact, even her interpretation of the Qur’an and expression of her Islamic spirituality are influenced by these roots. Furthermore, her level of education and her socio-economic background within the Moroccan working class contribute to this relationship with Islam. Therefore, it is interesting to see how she has renegotiated and provided her own interpretation of the sacred ritual symbols of Islam, such as prayer and pilgrimage. She also highlights the inevitable psychological and spiritual aspects of these rituals and how they help transform oneself daily and “return as a completely new person”.¹²⁹ By reasoning through and reworking the principles underlying them, she has offered her interpretation, which is indeed logical and coherent with the values and principles at the core of these religious practices – demonstrating that through the enactment of epistemic agency, one also achieves ethical agency (Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Laidlaw 2014). Specifically, this pertains to the connection with God, as well as intentionality, involvement, awareness, and the realisation of one’s own will, emotions, and environment.

¹²⁸ Ibidem.

¹²⁹ Ibidem.

3.3.1. Spirituality and faith as a means to achieve agency

In fact, as was also mentioned earlier, spirituality and faith play a central role in feeling the need to explore the topic of religion, as well as in feeling the freedom to reject certain norms based on one's own ethical values – connected to one's faith and spirituality. According to Farida, faith is a space where there are no doubts, only certainties that provide the tools to make sense of everything you feel and everything around you. In this, she recognises that there can be religious faith, but also other kinds of faith, and she distinguishes between spirituality and faith, the latter being primarily religious. In the former, she believes, people tend to do what they want, following reflection, awareness, and contact with what they believe in. Specifically, she presents it as a purely subjective and free force, in which one takes what feels right and rejects what does not, in a conscious and personalised way. Instead, regarding religious faith, she argues that the ability to choose and reject certain aspects and to “personalise them according to your personality”¹³⁰ becomes harder precisely because of the strict rules and norms that must be followed, which can otherwise lead someone away from the “right path”.

With reference to Islam, she considers her interpretation to be a balance between spiritual freedom and faith commitment. In particular, she recognises that there are rules to follow in Islam, but it is also a religion that allows space for reflection and the expression of subjective, peaceful spirituality. Although contradictions often arise in our conversations with her, she admits that clearly distinguishing between faith and spirituality is challenging. Overall, it seems that her concern is less about faith itself and more about religion as an ideology and a legal system, which she sees as tools for sustaining hierarchical power structures.

Therefore, taking this step into account, within the theoretical framework I discussed, Farida's distinction between faith and spirituality echoes the earlier distinction between moral and ethical norms. In fact, if I attempt to draw an interpretative connection, I could say that, according to Farida, religion is what

¹³⁰ Informal conversation with Farida. Fez, 24 March 2023.

would be called moral norms. That is, a set of rules, values, principles, behaviours, and ways of viewing the world, monopolised by social institutions that seek to instil them in individuals through socialisation, and manifested in individual *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990; Zigon 2007; Foucault 2014; Fassin 2014). Meanwhile, spirituality can be expressed through ethical norms, encompassing values, principles, and behaviours that arise from deep, conscious, and personal reflection. These norms are often independent and tend to develop in response to dilemmas, doubts, crises, and conflicts with societal norms and customs (Mahmood 2005, 2009; Zigon 2007; Geertz 1993; Fassin 2014; Abu-Lughod 2016; Vacchiano 2021; Menin 2012, 2024).

Alia gives religion a different meaning, sharing the view that, for her, it is spiritual and therefore a personal, intimate, and subjective matter in which she finds peace and relief. For this reason, no one has the right to interfere, explicitly criticising those who discuss how one should believe. Furthermore, she notes that she really likes Sufism because it allows more room for spirituality and emotion between the individual and religion, which she does not find to the same extent in the Mālikī interpretation. In the latter, she feels a bit more of the weight of norms and jurisprudence, which hide the spiritual side of the practices undertaken. Thus, Alia also interprets spirituality through the lens of conscious, free, and personal reflection, coherent with her own ethical principles, yet situates it within dominant discourses. Indeed, she does not question religion, nor does she refer to the relations of dominance that social institutions promote through religious narratives, issues of which Farida is more aware and has explicitly denounced. Nevertheless, she emphasises the essence and importance of spiritual intimacy in the Islamic faith, also referring to Sufi interpretation. Different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds can be relevant to framing these positions. Although both are master's students, Alia grew up in a rural setting with her grandfather and spent much of her life away from her working-class parents, although those few years shared with them were decisive for her journey as a Muslim girl. Farida grew

up in an urban environment and in a family with a higher socioeconomic background, since her mother is retired and her father is a French teacher.

Noura recognises faith and spirituality as interconnected, both sustained by the *niyya* of trusting in a specific worldview. She believes that, based on her research, whether someone is Christian, Jewish, or Muslim is less important than their personal faith. Nevertheless, she frequently considers herself Muslim and regularly seeks guidance and faith from the Qur'an, valuing her relationship with God, with reality, and with her environment. In fact, she believes that both small and large aspects of life can reflect one's faith, emphasising awareness and the capacity to find spiritual expression in everyday moments.

Speaking about the ritual practices of Islam and the veil, Doha shared that once she had grown up and gained more information about Islam during her upper secondary school studies, she felt she had become more mature in her understanding of prayer as a spiritual matter rather than merely a material one. Indeed, when she speaks of spirituality, she refers to what allows one to transcend worldly materialism and go deeper. She gives the example of conversations with God as moments when spirituality comes into play, because there is no single, specific language or medium, but rather practices that inevitably involve the spiritual and abstract side.

Hence, it emerges how each girl has their own representation of what spirituality or faith means to them. In any case, the driving force behind emotions and actions that lead to greater awareness and independence is, for the most part, linked to spirituality. Specifically, it relates to the individual psychological state in which they experience emotions and sensations of connection with God and the surrounding world, allowing them to give greater meaning and order to both their internal experience and their environment. These emotional and reactive states, born and developed internally, allow them to take positions and act as rational, independent subjects, thereby exercising their ethical agency (Mahmood 2005; Laidlaw 2014).

3.3.2. *Sexuality and romantic relationships*

In the ongoing daily conflicts faced by the girls interviewed, Farida expresses her disappointment with the discrimination often encountered by the LGBTQIA+ community in Morocco. She highlights that, in her perspective, her understanding of God and Islam differs from the way these are represented and upheld by the surrounding Muslim community. From the very beginning, Farida declared that she is a lesbian and belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community, which involves her in the dynamics and narratives that address issues related to sexuality and gender. In this conflict, which is very decisive for her stance towards the Islamic religion, although she admits not having explored the topic in the primary sources of Islam, such as the Qur'an or the *ḥadiths*, she acknowledges that this gap she notices has led her to pose numerous questions, doubts, and inquiries about the religion.

As discussed above, according to her, these contradictions reveal a difference between religion and faith: the latter refers to spirituality and actions guided by principles of respect and of individual and community well-being; the former is part of human constructs aimed at asserting and enforcing patriarchal power hierarchies. In particular, she recounts that after taking a university course focused on misogynistic interpretations of the Qur'an, she found herself very aligned with and in agreement with this thinking (Wadud 1999). She made extensive reference to interpretations that fuel gender inequalities and discrimination. Admitting that she is not very knowledgeable on the subject and has never read the Qur'an in its entirety nor conducted in-depth research on the matter, she often lamented the presence of groups of people who define themselves as Muslims but who restrict the freedom of heterogeneous subjectivities.

She also refers to the LGBTQIA+ community and exclaims: "If you are God, you should love me for the way that I am; for example, that can include the LGBTQ+ community!"¹³¹ Furthermore, she discusses how queer Muslim groups comment on the story of *Lūṭ* and the people of *Sadūm*, highlighting that they were

¹³¹ Informal conversatio with Farida. Fez, 24/03/2023.

executed for their disbelief in God, following thefts, rapes, and mistreatment, and not for their homosexuality. At the same time, however, she laments that other Muslim groups interpret this story as an example of the principle that homosexuality is forbidden and that this was therefore the main reason why God executed them (Nicoletti 2022).¹³²

From this story, as has emerged previously, it is possible to identify a plurality of interpretations and discourses surrounding the same religious narrative, each taking on different meanings for different individuals. The symbol of the punishment God inflicted upon *Lūṭ* and the people of *Sadūm* is the same, but their interpretations and significance differ. Therefore, this demonstrates the complexity of religious narratives, as well as the composition of Moroccan society and the *Ummah*. The presence of dominant narratives can coexist with alternative narratives that diverge from them yet are equally logical and valid; however, the difference lies in the authority and power each holds to be accepted as truth and circulated. Both are true and form part of reality, simply viewed from different perspectives, criteria, and priorities.

Farida, continuing to speak about the Moroccan LGBTQIA+ community, admits that she believes the community is much larger than commonly known, as many people do not feel free to discuss their sexuality, gender identity, or sexual orientation due to fears of discrimination and marginalisation. In fact, the dominant discursive tradition within the Moroccan community, through narratives and interpretations of Islamic sources, recognises homosexuality as *ḥarām* (forbidden). On the other hand, as Farida also demonstrated, there is another interpretation that aligns with both the principle of obedience to God and each believer's individual relationship with Him. Therefore, in the absence of clear and explicit references to the gravity of the sin, interpretations that do not question devotion and faith in *Allāh* are also considered valid. In fact, Zahra also notes that, in Islam, there are

¹³² <https://www.ilgrandecolibri.com/sexualita-corano-stigma-omosessualita-2/>. Accessed August 9, 2025.

degrees and levels of sin severity, and that, consequently, some sins are more acceptable than others.

In his work on homosexuality in Islam, Kugle (2010) discusses the importance of considering the historical and geographical context, which highlights the different ways in which the history of *Lūṭ* and the people of *Sadūm* can be interpreted by the Islamic community, and thus questions the existence of a single discriminatory narrative against the LGBTQIA+ community. Within these arguments, it is therefore possible to see how Farida, by challenging this narrative and providing an alternative reading of Islamic sources, enacts her own ethical agency (Mahmood 2005), engaging her capacity to live with her sense of being Muslim.

Furthermore, back to Farida's shares, she recounts that when she was little, her father and her uncles would take her to the *Moussem*, a community event that intertwines Moroccan history, religion, and tradition, where dances, horse races, religious rituals (often pilgrimages to the tombs of Sufi saints), sharing of meals, and ceremonies take place. At this event, Farida often recalls seeing drag queens perform alongside *Cheikhāt* (a Moroccan folk music and dance performer and singer), noting that, for her family, it was completely normal to see a man dressed as a woman. She highlights this to showcase her view on society's contradictions; she cannot comprehend how someone who might face discrimination elsewhere is welcomed at a major Moroccan traditional event.

Additionally, within the debate among Sunni Muslim scholars – including Sufis and Mālikīs – disagreements over certain practices and interpretations often occur. These disagreements are usually visible in “popular” discourses rather than in festivals and performative events, where some transgressions are tolerated. Additionally, even though the symbol remains unchanged, its interpretations and meanings continue to vary. Moreover, sexuality and its expression through the body remain a central theme at both social and individual levels. The diverse interpretations allow for numerous readings that can also challenge traditional social hierarchies, as exemplified by drag queens participating in one of Morocco's

most significant and traditional events. Even the interpretation of the biblical and Qur'anic story of *Lūṭ* and his people reinforces the thesis that groups and individuals have the possibility and power to reformulate, negotiate, and manipulate religious narratives, including the legitimate resistance to dominant narratives and deviation from the existing hierarchical order (Asad 1986b; Salime 2007; Dialmy 2019).

Regarding romantic relationships, Alia shares that in secondary school, she had a boyfriend who lived in the same village as she did – namely, in the Béni Mellal-Khénifra region. She says she spent little time in relationships because she was afraid of her parents' judgment and would run away as a result. In particular, her father forbade her from talking to boys outside the family, so she began having secret relationships with boys because she wanted to live her life freely, without anyone telling her what she should or should not do. Continuing her ex-boyfriend's story, she says they got on very well and even attended the same upper secondary school, which continued their romantic relationship. Both had parents who forbade them from getting engaged, and for this reason, they shared the same discomfort.

The romantic relationship and sexual relations outside of marriage (*zina*) are traditionally seen as dangerous and dishonourable because, especially for girls, there is a fear of men's insincerity and of losing one's respectability (Menin 2024). This respectability also extends to the honour of the family, which is responsible for educating the new generations, emphasising the social importance of family bonds and the moral values it is tasked with reproducing (Abu-Lughod 2016). In fact, marriage remains a significant social event for families and, for this reason, the consent of both parties is essential (Newcomb 2009).

Alia also emphasises that he had slightly fewer problems than she did because he was a boy and therefore did not face the same pressure about how to dress or when to go out. Furthermore, she admits that she felt guilty about having a romantic relationship, but at the same time, she often told herself she was doing nothing wrong because they were simply expressing natural human emotions of love. Nonetheless, she often wondered whether it was the right thing to do and was

afraid that her parents might find out. Finally, however, she managed to convince herself that she was not doing anything wrong and that it was right to get to know and spend time with a boy – without having sexual relations – because the importance and necessity of finding “the other half” are also mentioned in the Qur’an. In particular, she cites the *āya* that narrates the creation of Adam and Eve and the fact that God created them from the same *nafs* (soul), and therefore, this forms the basis of Alia’s interpretation that “*khasna nlqaw lnafs lkhra dyalna*” (“we must find our other soul/soulmate”).¹³³

This passage is particularly interesting because it reveals a moment of crisis, doubt, and dilemma that Alia experienced in this romantic relationship, prompting her to question some moral certainties she had learned during socialisation (Bordieau 1990; Zigon 2007). In particular, having romantic relationships outside marriage is forbidden and widely accepted as a moral norm in Morocco and among Islamic authorities, but using the same authoritative source, namely the Qur’an, she found another interpretation, equally valid and ethical. In fact, what Schielke (2009) calls “moral ambivalence” emerges – that is, the feeling of being legitimised to explore and engage in romantic relationships, even clandestine ones hidden from their family, while at the same time feeling guilty because of Islamic moral norms, which, according to orthodox discursive traditions, do not permit dating without the family’s ritual consent (*khutbah*).

In the challenging attempt to reconcile love in this globalised world and intimate relationships as prescribed in Islam, it is therefore possible to find a space where new social and intimate dynamics are formed (Menin 2024). According to Menin (2024), love not only reproduces the power dynamics of gender and heteronormativity but also stimulates an alternative imaginary that goes beyond the dominant social and gender order. In this process, Alia managed to find a balance between moral norms and ethical norms, thereby further highlighting the complexity and richness of interpretations that can arise from religious narratives

¹³³ Informal conversation with Alia. Fez, 13 April 2023.

and that are equally logical, even if not formally accepted by the power's institutions and social ones.

The strength of spirituality and faith is an essential driving force in this reflective practice because, through the relief and peace Alia has found in Islam, she has gained the strength and space to renegotiate and reshape religious norms in ways that align with her needs and experiences, enacting her ethical agency (Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Vacchiano 2021). In fact, all of this is part of an equally important driver: the *niyya*, which motivates both the performance of prescribed religious rituals (Geertz 1993) and their questioning, personalisation, renegotiation, or rejection. Even from the conversation with Doha, it emerges that she has a boyfriend and that, for this reason, she does not feel like a “perfect Muslim”¹³⁴ because she believes she cannot even have male friends.

Doha – belonging to a lower-class family, raised in a coastal city of the Eastern Region and then in a rural village of Fez-Meknès before moving to Fez for studies – is one of the girls who wear the veil and has shared that she feels very connected to and devoted to *Allāh*.

When I asked her to explain this point further, she told me that when a male and a female are alone, there is a third presence between them: *shayṭān* (Satan). Specifically, she refers both to physical contact and to how, in these, there is contact with the devil's body that stimulates sexual instincts, endangering mutual respect. Furthermore, she continues explaining that also sharing a platonic love is *ḥaram* outside of marriage, because there is the thought that, sooner or later, sexual desire might also arise on one side or the other.

In fact, she often says she feels guilty for being in this relationship, but also recognises that she is not doing anything wrong because, although they kiss and hold hands, they do not have sexual relations, and in her view, it is necessary to have a period of dating and engagement to get to know each other before getting married. Similarly, Lolita shares that she is in a romantic relationship with a boy

¹³⁴ Informal conversation with Doha. Fez, 21 March 2023.

who is a year older than her, emphasising that she has done nothing wrong, since they only have simple conversations and, when they go out, they have never kissed, only held hands. For her, having sexual relations before marriage is out of the question because, besides being *haram*, she would not understand whether he truly loves her or whether he is engaged with her just for sex. In fact, she cares deeply about a relationship full of love, with the hope of eventually getting married, raising children peacefully, and travelling around the world; for her, there can be no marriage without love.

Additionally, she shares that she really likes this boy because, despite being seventeen years old, he is already very responsible, as he works and brings money home to his mother, who raised him alone. For Lolita, seeing the love and care the boy shows his mother is a sign that he is a good, mature boy, and “*mrabbhin lwalidin f aḥsan trabbiya*” (“the parents have raised him with the best education”).¹³⁵

Alia, Doha, and Lolita all expressed feelings of guilt, some more consciously than others, but all reassured themselves by rationalising the fact that they were not doing anything wrong. It is important to note and consider that these girls wish to maintain their spiritual connection and their devotion to God and Islam (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Menin 2024), which is why they find themselves in difficulty and enter into conflict, living in a state of “moral ambivalence” (Schielke 2009). In fact, compared to previous generations of Moroccan women, girls can now access education – even university – despite coming from poor or lower-middle-class backgrounds, and they also have the stimuli of a virtual world at their fingertips. For these reasons, they live in a constant contradiction: they have more space to imagine romantic relationships and express their subjectivity, yet they encounter moral and structural obstacles that make this freedom of choice somewhat less real (Menin 2024). Nevertheless, each girl provided her own reinterpretation and reformulation of the dominant

¹³⁵ Informal conversation with Alia. Fez, 13 April 2023.

Islamic narrative on the matter, but all remained faithful to having no sexual or intimate relations. As has often emerged, this theme is very present and important, and it is interesting to see how, despite being a central moral norm for social order, it is also felt just as strongly at an individual and intimate level, notwithstanding subjective ethical reasoning.

When Zahra and I discuss topics related to boys and romantic relationships, she mentions that the Qur'an advises against promising a woman something that could make her unhappy and that he cannot fulfil. She also stresses the importance of parental awareness and obtaining their consent, as it is essential for securing their blessing and increasing the likelihood of a successful relationship. The day we met again, we also met Fauzia, with whom the conversation then extended. Together, we discussed engagement and marriage, and both shared that nowadays the *khutbah* (formal engagement/marriage proposal) is preceded by a period of dating between the two young people. Instead, in earlier generations, the *khutbah* was the occasion when the couple first glimpsed each other and had time to become acquainted from that point until their wedding day. This passage is compelling because Zahra and Fauzia mention their parents' generation, and I would note that, based on their account, the meaning of the *khutbah* has evolved. It also seems to reduce some of the authority traditionally held by the family, serving as a necessary step before romantic dating; rather, throughout history, this social structure has gradually shifted, transforming the *khutbah* into a marker confirming the decision to pursue a romantic relationship that had already begun independently and outside socially accepted moral norms. It no longer signifies the initial meeting or beginning of a relationship between future spouses, accompanied by their families. Zahra says she imagines that once the boy makes *khutbah* with her parents, they would have some time to get to know and talk to each other, noting that: “‘*adi, fl htiram*’”(“normal, with respect”).¹³⁶ When I asked her why she would not choose to be engaged and get to know him before the *khutbah*, she responded that she

¹³⁶ Informal conversation with Zahra. Fez, 22 June 2023.

would prefer not to because “*Allāh ma ki baraksh fik*”(“God does not bless you”).¹³⁷

Therefore, as has emerged previously, sexual relations are central to the conception of virtue and respect, both towards oneself and as a sign of deference to God. While in the previous chapter I addressed the topic from the perspective of *hashama* in the discussion regarding social and family judgment, here the focus shifts to the personal, ethical, and subjective side, linked to both spirituality and faith in Islam. Although the girls have renegotiated the norms that establish certain codes of action and interaction between males and females, the issue of sexual relations still appears to be very important and deeply rooted. Likely, because it is a profoundly intimate and penetrative act, it risks excessively disrupting the ethical balance they strive to restore daily through effort and hardship.

Furthermore, from the work of Moroccan sociologists Dialmy (1988, 2005, 2019) and Namaane-Guessous (1991), it has emerged how power acts upon and dominates sexuality and intimacy, which is also visible in “the social construction of the female body, and the cultural ideas of shame and virginity” (Menin 2024, 13). Nevertheless, Menin (2024) discusses how young people’s relationship with sexuality and intimacy is also “a space for self-exploration and reflexivity, where conventional modalities of masculinities and femininities and intimate dynamics are reflected upon, called into question, and imagined in new ways” (13). In imagining and discovering new ways of living and engaging in romantic relationships, the girls enact their agency, reformulating the social and gendered generational orders (Berlant 2011; Menin 2024). It also becomes clear that parents continue to hold a central, even symbolic, role as a “blessing” for the romantic relationship, thereby giving their figure spiritual importance through *baraka* – the same divine power that God possesses to bestow, as Zahra mentioned. Furthermore, it remains very important for Muslim Moroccan couples to have their

¹³⁷ Ibidem.

families' consent and to combine this with a romantic relationship grounded in love (Hart 2007; Maqsood 2021; Menin 2024).

3.4. Conclusions

As emerges from the analysis of interviews with the girls I met in Fez and Casablanca, the meanings and interpretations attributed to sacred symbols and Islamic religious sources are heterogeneous. In particular, the Moroccan historical context today allows engagement with dominant discursive traditions of Sunni Islam and, at the same time, with Muslim women and men who negotiate, reinterpret, or reject these narratives daily, reshaping them in subjective ways. This process, which often emerges following dilemmas, conflicts, crises, encounters, and clashes, leads to a “break” between moral certainties and ethical values, triggering the engine of questioning, reinterpretation, reformulation, negotiation, active inquiry, and subjective stance (Mattalucci 2003; Mahmood 2005; Zigon 2007; Vacchiano 2021; Menin 2024). Within this dynamic, power relations fluctuate daily between socially accepted moral norms dictated by authoritative institutions and personal ethical norms shaped by individual reflections and experiences. Depending on the case, these personal norms either align with or diverge from the dominant narrative (El-Zein 1977; Foucault 1982). Ultimately, most girls find their balance and well-being through exercising their free will and making deliberate choices that align with their Islamic faith (Mahmood 2005; Vacchiano 2021).

The *baḥth*, through which they exercise epistemic agency, serves as the starting point for the girls' actions related to free will, awareness, and interpretative choices within Islamic sources and narratives. The advent of the internet and social media plays a central role as tools that allow easy access to sources, discussions, and debates, and also offers narratives that diverge from the dominant ones, such as the experiences of Zahra, Alia, and Farida. As discussed by Menin (2012, 2024), these changes enable girls to access a broader world that allows them to stimulate new imaginaries and desires, also transforming the discursive logic that expresses

their Muslim faith, discovering further forms of ethical manifestation that can either distance themselves from or intertwine with traditional Islamic principles and practices. Farida's shares also reveal both her awareness of the power dynamics present in the society she lives in and the fragility of the dominant narratives. In particular, she highlights the plurality of interpretations within the Sunni Islamic school of thought, in which even authoritative figures who disseminate "truthful" narratives disagree with one another, as exemplified by her discussion of the *hijāb* debate. Furthermore, like Siham, Fauzia, Doha, Farida, and Zahra emphasise the complexity and difficulty of reading the Qur'an and Hadith without the appropriate tools. In fact, they discuss the importance of a thorough approach to studying the sources, taking into account their context, origins, and contents, given their complexity and depth – which transcend doctrine and reach the spirit. According to Doha, engaging in rituals helps individuals attain this depth, which is only achievable through active pursuit and awareness of Islam's core values and principles. Through this process, the girls develop ethical agency, enabling them to connect their bodies and minds to the social environment through ritual practices (Mattalucci 2003; Mahmood 2005; McGuire 2008; Foucault 2014), which also allow them to express their deepest faith and shape their daily lives and personalities (Lapidus 1984; Mahmood 2009). Furthermore, these experiences once again shed light on the plurality of meanings that each sacred symbol may have, thereby creating a heterogeneous interpretative narrative that may coexist with and shape the various facets of Islam (Asad 1986b; Geertz 1993; Marcotte 2010; Vacchiano 2021).

It also emerges as the inquiry and exploration of religious doctrines – which, as both Siham and Alia share, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, are fundamental in shaping individuals' decisions to remain in the religion into which they were born or to convert to another, following greater understanding and reflection. In fact, this demonstrates that having faith, in addition to being a mood that comes from the heart, as Ibn Khaldoun discusses (as cited in Lapidus 1984), is a daily choice, and that, as argued by the girls, it can be made with greater

awareness following the exercise of epistemic agency – that is, through active research, critical interpretation, and the selection and comparison of multiple sources to form one’s own logic.

Talking about Islam, Siham, like Alia and Fauzia, emphasises that a greater understanding of Islam nurtures and reshapes *īmān*, allowing them to find well-being and balance that primarily stem from reflection and personal choice. In various discussions about the significance of personal inquiry into religion, Noura emphasises freedom, love, and conscience as essential pillars of her Islamic faith. She sees freedom as the capacity to question social teachings and the desire to seek understanding, aligning with the divine call in the Qur’an to read and grounded in the Islamic values of knowledge (Lapidus 1984), reflecting a form of ethical and epistemic agency exercised through, rather than against, religious commitment (Mahmood 2005; Laidlaw 2014).

The power relations between dominant narratives and the subjective narratives that can emerge, transform, and spread within society exhibit a constant dynamism that fluctuates daily, producing inevitable conflicts and contradictions (Butler 2002; Pizza 2004; Mahmood 2005; Mattalucci 2012; Abu-Lughod 2016). These conflicts and contradictions arise from free will and the subjective agency that individuals – and, in this case, the interviewed girls – exercise by manipulating dominant narratives and finding spaces for action, toward transformative practices and discourses (Foucault 1982; Mattalucci 2003; Mahmood 2005; Menin 2012; 2024). Most of the girls attending university seem to have more tools for questioning religious “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980), as is especially evident in Noura and Farida’s discussions. However, this condition is neither sufficient nor necessary, because equally Doha and Fauzia, as well as Siham and Zahra, have found their comfort, well-being, and relief within orthodox discursive traditions, albeit with subjective nuances of action and interpretation.

Niyya is the deep intentionality behind religious actions and rituals that, according to the girls’ sharing, would otherwise lose their meaning. Indeed, Fauzia believes that *niyya* is connected to the essence of virtue and, like Doha, shares the

moment when she decided to wear the veil as the moment she intended to do so. Lolita also draws a connection to the veil and agrees that, at the moment, she does not feel she has enough *niyya* to wear it. These interpretations recall the definition that Ibn Khaldoun gives of *malaka* (as cited in Lapidus 1984) in relation to faith, namely the set of actions, values, and discourses that an individual practises daily and that become an integral part of their being, accepted and assimilated, as well as products and producers of well-being and virtue (Mahmood 2009).

Furthermore, Fauzia offers an interpretation of individual education, linking it to the trust parents place in their children and to how this may influence *niyya* in performing religious practices and rituals, citing examples from her classmates. In this discourse, she highlights the centrality of intentionality as a key principle of faith and spirituality in Islam, criticising oppressive education and arguing that it is counterproductive to the ethical formation of Islamic spirituality and faith. This discourse is also consistent with Geertz's (2013) discussion, which states that intentionality is central to individual religious practices, as they are consciously undertaken, following a subjective choice and reflection. Mahmood (2009) also argues that individuals' daily actions are guided by religious principles and norms that shape their internal value system and are not perceived as social impositions but rather as fostering feelings of faith and devotion.

Moreover, as Noura's sharing shows, *niyya* can take on multiple meanings depending on context, extending beyond its link to faith and spirituality. First of all, she discusses it as a concept in a religious sense, and more precisely as a connection with God that occurs through the relationship established during *ṣalāt*, sharing that she stopped praying and making *du'ā'* when she realised she was not doing so with the *niyya*. In fact, both Zahra and Siham highlight it as a necessary glue for deeply perceiving the connection with God and for connecting spirituality to one's body, especially during prayer and rituals in general. Noura also references this when sharing the story of the wise Sufi man who assists her in healing through his *niyya*, which is understood as a means of acquiring *baraka* from God; in this context, the connection with *Allāh* comes into focus, providing

the strength and ability to heal. Furthermore, Noura discusses the *niyya*, also understood as intentionality, purified of its spiritual aspect and rendered purely psychological, enacted within everyday social dynamics, using the example of a caress between a boy and a girl. Finally, she explains the principles of love and consciousness, as both are children of *niyya*. Love is about acting with heartfelt intention, while consciousness involves rationality, empathy, and tact in actions – considering both one’s own well-being and that of others – all of which are motivated by intention. Furthermore, within this discourse, she shares the view that performing Islamic rituals and practices for the secondary purpose of going to Paradise or Hell is akin to an act of corruption, as it does not align with freedom, love, and conscience, but rather serves another end.

So, it emerges that the engine of *niyya* is central to the connection with one’s own consciousness and the surrounding world. It appears that this connection occurs through rituals and gestures, thereby highlighting the centrality of the body and psyche (Geertz 1993; Mahmood 2005; McGuire 2008). From conversations with the girls, numerous instances emerge in which they offer their interpretations of specific religious practices and rituals, which they consider ethical and consistent with Islamic values and principles. For example, Alia shares her reflections on the importance of wearing the veil, expressing her questions, argumentations and conclusions. The same applies to Noura, who explains the meaning she assigns to *ṣalāt* and *ḥajj*, maintaining their core values of connection, meditation, and spiritual purification while finding an alternative within their ritual practice. Furthermore, like Noura, she has chosen to consider the Qur’an as valid and trustworthy, questioning the authority and truthfulness of some *ḥadiths*, which are regarded as the result of research and the drafting of narratives by men. As previously mentioned, Noura adheres to the core principles of love, freedom, and conscience and would reject any Qur’anic passages that contradict these values. From their shared viewpoints, a variety of interpretations arise, shaped by personal experience, challenging the “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1980) promoted by social

institutions, suggesting alternative narratives that can coexist and sometimes intersect with dominant ones (Foucault 1982; Mahmood 2005).

Regarding spirituality and faith, it emerges that they are central to religious narratives. Farida differentiates between spirituality and faith, emphasising that religion often involves norms that reinforce hierarchies of power, whereas spirituality pertains to the personal and subjective aspects. The distinction allows us to see the anthropological discussion of moral norms as principles, values, behaviours, rules, and worldviews spread by social institutions through socialisation and repeatedly practised by individuals via *habitus*. Ethical norms, on the other hand, are defined as a set of values, behaviours, and principles that develop through individuals' conscious and subjective reflection – after facing moments of crisis, dilemmas, doubts, and inner conflicts, as well as the challenges of the surrounding world (Bourdieu 1990; Zigon 2007; Menin 2012, 2024; Foucault 2014; Fassin 2014; Abu-Lughod 2016; Vacchiano 2021).

What often emerges, once again, is the heterogeneity of interpretations. In fact, Alia does not distinguish between religion and spirituality, but recognises the necessary presence of the latter in the former. Indeed, within it, there is freedom, awareness, and personal reflection that allow the exercise of ethical values leading to individual well-being, which Alia finds in the Sufi interpretation of Islam. Noura also emphasises that, for her, faith and spirituality are interconnected and nourished by a connection with God, particularly by the ability and awareness to find one's spiritual expression and communicate with the divine. From this, the centrality of practice emerges; even Doha, when speaking about this, refers to spirituality as a space and a force that allows one to go beyond the materialism of the world and life. Alongside the body, therefore, there is the entire psychological aspect that triggers emotions and sensations, which then lead to a certain approach. This is also argued by Mahmood (2005, 2009), who discusses how religious practices are driven by emotions and intimate choices that the faithful experience and act upon in daily life, thereby building ethical personalities through the very practices themselves – and therefore exercise their ethical agency (Laidlaw 2014).

During conversations with the girls, when the topics of sexuality and romantic relationships are discussed, it often emerges that these are areas of tension between moral and ethical norms. On the issue of sexuality, particularly gender identity and sexual orientation, Farida expresses disapproval of the discrimination faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in Morocco, recognising it as inconsistent with what she considers to be Islam and God. By sharing her doubts about this gap, her reflections, studies, and conclusions, she highlights several interesting points. The first is the importance she herself places on the fact that she has not studied and researched the Qur'an and *ḥadiths* enough, recognising the limits of her discussions on the matter. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that despite this, she recognises there is a gap between faith and religion – as previously discussed – in which the latter reflects the exercise of patriarchal power due to dominance and misogynistic interpretations promoted by authorities. Furthermore, by presenting various interpretations of the story of *Lūṭ* and the people of *Sadūm* from Islamic scholars, she highlights how different interpretations coexist with dominant ones while remaining consistent with Islamic values and principles. Her sharing also reveals the conflict discussed in the second chapter regarding how girls perceive the actions of the Muslim community (Schielke 2009). This perception is influenced by the dissociation between the moral values promoted by dominant narratives and the actual actions of people around them – for example, the case Farida mentions about drag queens at the *Moussem*.

Some girls also face issues related to romantic relationships, often feeling guilty and living with “moral ambivalence” (Schielke 2009). For instance, Alia recounts her past relationship with a boy, emphasising the difficulties of maintaining it and the guilt that haunted her thoughts since it was a clandestine affair, not accepted by either family. Despite this, she shares a belief that helped her overcome her struggles: reinterpreting the Qur'anic verse narrating the history of Adam and Eve's creation from the same soul, seeing this as meaning that, as human beings, we should seek our own soulmates. This reinterpretation allowed

her to renegotiate a moral norm, aligning it ethically with Qur'anic principles even if it contradicts social norms. Ultimately, this brought Alia relief and inner peace, reaffirming the importance of intentionality, spirituality, and faith in Islam. In this regard, Menin (2024) argues that young Muslim women in Morocco, seeking to reconcile Islamic-accepted intimate relationships with love in today's globalised world, seek out, find, and navigate new spaces of expression, imagination, and action that are transforming the social and gender order in which they live daily. Even Doha shares the feeling of not considering herself a "perfect Muslim" because she is engaged, but she remains consistent as long as they do not have sexual relations outside marriage (*zina*). Lolita also discusses *zina* alongside Alia and Doha, explaining that, thanks to her commitment to chastity and despite facing moral struggles, she finds ethical values that help her view her actions as consistent and acceptable within her Islamic faith.

Moreover, Zahra and Fauzia recognise that times have changed and that, compared with previous generations, having a boyfriend before the *khuṭbah* has become normalised. They also agree that, if the relationship remains outside the bounds of sexual intimacy, it is acceptable, as it is logical to encounter – before marriage – the person with whom one will share life. This reveals how the authority of the family and the symbolic meaning of the *khuṭbah* have evolved over time, giving way to new forms and interpretations that are equally valid and consistent with Islamic values and norms (Menin 2024).

Despite this, Zahra admits that she prefers to deliver the *khuṭbah* first, out of fear of not being blessed by God and thus facing negative repercussions in the marriage, revealing the oscillation between awareness and choice. Therefore, the family still holds an important role in the intimate relationships among its members, since individual actions can affect the family's honour in relation to its members' virtue and social actions (Abu-Lughod 2016). Indeed, in Morocco, marriage remains an important social event that, in most cases, requires the consent and agreement of both families of the marrying couple (Newcomb 2009), who,

meanwhile, try to combine family consent with love (Hart 2007; Maqsood 2021; Menin 2024).

Through religious narrative, it is also possible to shed light on how sexuality and intimacy are arenas in which the exercise of power occurs (Dialmy 1988, 2005, 2019; Namaane-Guessous 1991), also visible in “the social construction of the female body, and the cultural ideas of shame and virginity” (Menin 2024, 13). Within this dynamic, the girls exercise their agency by responding through internal reflections that allow them to question and renegotiate some dominant discourses on intimacy and sexuality, enabling them to find new spaces of expression that are consistent with their own ethics, thereby transforming the pre-existing social and gender order (Berlant 2011; Menin 2024).

The girls’ stories reveal the intricate nature of religion as both a social and psychological phenomenon. Power dynamics are continually shifting and fluctuating, shaped by individual perspectives and diverse thematic dimensions, allowing subjectivities and their narratives to influence and respond to one another within and through Morocco’s social history.

CONCLUSIONS

This work began with a desire to understand the relationship between young Moroccan Muslim women and their faith. This stemmed from both personal and political curiosity in order to provide a counter-narrative to orientalist (Said 1978) and femonationalist discourses (Farris 2017) that portray Muslim women as submissive and “in need of saving” (Abu-Lughod 2013). These narratives are increasingly widespread in the West and beyond, also on a global level, within various liberal feminist schools of thought (Mahmood 2009), especially since the start of the “war on terror” by Europe and the United States (Salime 2007; Billaud 2015; Wainscott 2015; Sheline 2018).

The following thesis indeed highlights the complexity of this topic and how each of the interviewed girls has her own relationship with Islam, shedding light on how they daily engage in reflections and choices that are expressions of their agency (Mattalucci 2003, 2012; Mahmood 2005; Landry 2012; Abu-Lughod 2016; Menin 2024).

However, in doing so, they encounter a set of moral norms learned during socialisation processes – first within the family and then at school – and reproduced daily, consciously and/or unconsciously (Lapidus 1986; Bourdieu 1990; Mahmood 2009). In fact, it has been observed that there is a constant, daily dialogue between dominant religious narratives and individual ones, demonstrating the specificity of each story while also intersecting with a broader social and political context (Mahmood 2005; Landry 2010; Geertz 1993; Vacchiano 2021; Menin 2024).

The girls interviewed are part of a young generation living in a world of profound and rapid changes, especially in the Moroccan context, which, from the late 1990s onwards, has experienced numerous socio-political events that have altered the country’s social and religious order. In particular, the centralisation of religious institutions in the hands of the State has led to the strengthening of a dominant religious narrative, in which the Mālikī interpretation and the tolerance

of Sufism hold a prevailing legitimacy, especially after the attacks in Casablanca in 2003. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the criminal and civil codes follow a mixed legal system; in particular, the personal and family spheres are governed by Islamic religious law (*Shari'a*), while the remaining spheres are regulated by French and international law.

Within this narrative, it is possible to identify the “orthodox discursive traditions” (Asad 1986b) and the dominant discourses promoted by actors and institutions in power. These dominant discourses aim to establish “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980) that determine the modes, subjects, and spaces capable of producing what is considered “true,” including through legal mechanisms.

The goal is to simplify the means of achieving a solid rhetorical foundation, thereby legitimising their authority. In this, the cohesion of public opinion is fundamental, but, as previously discussed, individuals also possess “free will” and pragmatism, which enable them to reformulate, negotiate, and manipulate religious narratives in various ways (Butler 1993, 2002; Salih 2002; Mahmood 2009; Vacchiano 2021; Menin 2024).

Consequently, I found it important to consider the theoretical distinction between moral norms and ethical norms, where the former are the rules social institutions try to teach, while the latter are the set of rules that an individual imposes on themselves after reflections, considerations, and choices (Foucault 1982, 2014; Zigon 2007; Mahmood 2009; Vacchiano 2021; Fassin 2014). When sharing these records, social institutions such as the family and school, in addition to speeches by authoritative religious and political figures, also influence the process (Foucault 1980; Asad 1986b; Bourdieu 1990; Vacchiano 2021).

In fact, from the stories told in these pages, all the girls share the experience of their first encounter with Islam at home, observing their parents and being instructed by them in what constituted good practices and moral values to follow. Subsequently, at school, they further explored the sources and narratives of Islam presented by the state and society. For some, like Siham, Fauzia, Isra', and Alia, Islamic education at school helped them to better understand and engage more

deeply with the Islamic faith. However, Farida and Noura criticise their school experiences, particularly the purely dogmatic teaching of religion and, at times, the repressive and hierarchical approach of teachers and parents.

From these contrasts, it is possible to see a deeper divide between them and both previous generations and the authorities who represent and disseminate Islamic religious narratives. In fact, Fauzia often highlights the intergenerational gap and the tendency for many people to reproduce traditional rather than religious practices. In a less conscious manner than Fauzia, Lolita also complains about the conflict in her relationship with her mother and brother, although in her and Huda's experience, it emerges that even girls their age reproduce this invasive and authoritative moral discourse. This is most likely due to the education they received, but despite this, the intergenerational gap persists because of the rapid and drastic historical and social changes – such as the advent of social media and new public debates on religious and gender issues – that have taken place in the Moroccan context over the past three decades (Loimeier 2013; Ennaji 2021; Feixa et al. 2022; Stierl and Deanna 2022; Rostom 2022; Menin 2024; Szmolka 2024).

These attitudes, often called “hypocritical” by the girls, reveal the contradictions within religious narratives, which, as languages (Abu-Lughod 2016), can have various forms and interpretations, often leading to clashes (Asad 1986b; Mahmood 2005; Landry 2010). In fact, each girl upholds different Islamic values and principles, which, in their view, are not practised or implemented correctly by many followers of their community. This, therefore, places them in dilemmas, in “moral ruptures” (Zigon 2007), and raises questions about who genuinely adheres to the values and norms prescribed by Islam and who does not, highlighting the complexity of being young Muslim women in early twenty-first-century Morocco, as well as the complexity of Islamic narratives more broadly.

It is from here that numerous interpretations and considerations of what makes a “true” Muslim emerge, and voices such as Doha, Zahra, Fauzia, Isra', Alia, and Siham highlight the importance of rituals like prayer and fasting, but also of abstaining from stealing, drinking alcohol, having sexual relations outside

marriage, gossiping, or lacking patience. Through these virtues, which are also emphasised by Noura and Lolita, it is possible to express one's devotion and feel Muslim, because, as Farida has also shared, being Muslim can extend beyond ritual practices; it is an attitude towards life that respects oneself and others. In fact, as Mahmood (2005, 2009) also discusses, heterogeneity emerges in the ethical conception of virtue, and therefore each person constructs their own being Muslim in a subjective manner, intersecting orthodox practices and moral norms with re-negotiated ethical standards (Geertz 1993; Mattalucci 2003; Landry 2012; Foucault 2014; Vacchiano 2021; Menin 2012, 2024).

It suggests that a constant, more intimate internal dialogue, often conflicted, emerges when certain virtuous ritual practices are enacted or not (Zigon 2007; Schielke 2009; Berlant 2011). In particular, Isra', Alia, Lolita, and Siham express their desire and intention to wear the veil in the future, aware that this will make them more devout, help them feel more connected to their Islamic faith, and allow them to continue building their selves (Mahmood 2009), giving them a sense of *raḥa* (relief) that many speak of in relation to the practice of religious rituals and beyond.

In fact, Zahra and Siham also report that, following the grief they have experienced, religion has helped them greatly to “overcome depression”. In general, as the other girls report, it helps them face the hardships of daily life and of life itself, giving meaning to what surrounds them and to what they feel (Geertz 1968). Amid these emotions and sensations of serenity, there is also an awareness of greater forces – such as fate – that constrain human actions (Abu-Lughod 2016; Menin 2012, 2024). For this reason, when setbacks or suffering occur, the girls try to find a “*khīr*” (good) in them, because they deeply believe God has prescribed a better destiny, which gives them a sense of relief and trust in their life events. The issue of fate recurs in various conversations, such as with Isra' when we talk about marriage, or with Zahra and Siham regarding the grief they have experienced, and with Doha and Fauzia discussing smaller, everyday unforeseen events.

The sensations of “*raḥa*” and “*salam dakhili*” are also fostered by the feeling and awareness of belonging to a community that shares the same principles and supports one another. In fact, as shared by all the girls, symbols of mutual aid include *ṣadaqa* and *zakāt* – practices of mutual financial support that redistribute wealth as prescribed in Islam – as well as sharing *ifṭār* with family during Ramadan and sharing prayer spaces in the mosque and at major religious festivals.

These “intersubjective experiences” (McGuire 2008), brought about by the practice of religious rituals, as well as by intentionality and faith (Lapidus 1984; Mahmood 2009), involve feelings and emotions (Geertz 1993; Abu-Lughod 2016) that foster a sense of connection and community belonging, which manifests in “social solidarity” and is essential to the expression and devotion to the Islamic religion (Issawi 1950; Gellner 1961; Mahmood 2009; Abu-Lughod 2016), offering a counterpoint to the individualist and consumerist neoliberal model of capitalism.

In this context, the body often functions as a form of expression and is crucial in shaping one’s spirituality, personality, and devotion (McGuire 2008; Mahmood 2005, 2009). Indeed, Fauzia and Doha note that the veil has become a core part of their identity, making it hard to imagine themselves without it. Even when Lolita and Huda face neighbours commenting on their appearance or on Huda’s veil, or when Lolita’s family advises her to dress modestly, these comments highlight how the body functions as a symbolic element within Moroccan social norms. This social order is grounded in moral values like modesty (*hashama*), which signifies the respectability of the girl and her family (Mahmood 2009; Abu-Lughod 2016; Menin 2024). Furthermore, it demonstrates how the body and intimacy are intertwined with power relations (Dialmy 1988, 2005, 2019; Bourdieu 1990; Namaane-Guessous 1990; Mahmood 2005, 2009; Mattalucci 2012; Menin 2012, 2024; Abu-Lughod 2016).

In fact, the family remains an important social institution and plays a central role in the girls’ daily lives, particularly in matters of intimacy and romantic relationships, as symbolised by marriage (Menin 2024). Indeed, Zahra insists on giving the *khuṭbah* before starting to date a boy, because otherwise there would be

no blessing from the family – and, consequently, not from God either – implying that problems in the relationship could arise without it. Each of them experiences romantic relationships and the imagery of marriage in their own way; Doha, Noura, Alia, and Lolita openly share that they are or have been engaged. Although they feel some guilt, they are also relieved that they are not engaging in sexual relations, which helps them stay aligned with Islamic ethical values. Coherently, Fauzia, Zahra, Doha, Alia, Lolita, and Huda note that times have changed and that nowadays it is common to have a boyfriend before the *khutbah*, since it is important to understand the person one will marry.

These stories once again highlight the generational gap between twenty-first-century young Muslim Moroccan women and previous generations of women, as well as the way in which girls exercise their agency by pursuing their own interests, informed by reflections and redefinitions that make them comfortable with Islamic moral norms and that, at the same time, align with social and personal changes, finding expression in new subjective Islamic ethical norms (Bulter 1993; Pizza 2004; Mahmood 2005, 2009; Mattalucci 2012; Foucault 2014; Abu-Lughod 2016; Menin 2024).

The girls' stories demonstrate that *niyya* (deep intentionality) plays a crucial role in *baḥṭh* (research), guiding them to study, comprehend, contextualise, criticise, and reinterpret Islamic sources in ways that align with Islamic values and ethical principles, thus enacting epistemic agency. In this way, the girls support the practice of “reading”, which, in cases such as those of Zahra, Fauzia, and Siham, they cite as the first word of the Qur'an. For this reason, research and study not only acquaint them with their religion but also nurture their faith and spirituality, serving both as a means and an end in the achievement and practice of the virtue of faithfulness/piety (Landry 2010; Mahmood 2005). Through this process, the ethical sphere (Foucault 2014) of the individual is activated, as performing religious rituals with their own bodies allows them to express their ethical agency and forge a connection with reality through bodily action (Geertz 1993; Mattalucci 2003; McGuire 2008; Mahmood 2012).

Niyya can carry various contextual meanings, as shown by Noura's experience with the blessed Sufi lord or the deliberate, loving nature of everyday gestures, which must be performed consciously. This idea is also evident in Fauzia's description of her classmates' relationship with the veil and aligns with Lolita and Alia's shared focus on intentionality behind choosing to wear the veil. Generally, *niyya* is regarded as the intentionality that originates from the heart and is therefore the purest expression of faith in religion (Lapidus 1984; Mahmood 2009).

Between *buhūt* (researches) and *niyya*, conflicts, good intentions, clashes, and "moral ambivalences" (Schielke 2009; Menin 2024) emerge daily as the girls confront their interpretations, principles, and ethical norms against the moral standards, customs, and discursive "orthodox" Islamic traditions. The main arena in which this conflict occurs encompasses intimacy, sexuality, and romantic relationships, demonstrating how power operates on the body and within the intimacy of subjectivities, as well as how these subjectivities respond by claiming their own space, imagining, renegotiating, and creating new forms of expressivity (Mahmood 2005; Mattalucci 2012; Menin 2024). For example, Farida shares that she is lesbian and disagrees with the dominant religious interpretations regarding the LGBTQIA+ community; at the same time, she also finds an interpretative approach to Islamic sources that allows her to find legitimacy and connection with God – thus enacting her own ethical agency and reclaiming her space within her Muslim spirituality (Mahmood 2005; Dialmy 2010; Kugle 2010).

Her story reveals the complexities and contradictions present not only within Moroccan Muslim society but also in each girl's daily life. Alia, Doha, and Lolita share their perspectives on love, ranging from giving personal meaning to the Adam and Eve story to acknowledging human imperfection and varying degrees of sin. Indeed, they believe their romantic relationships remain within permissible limits, crossing into forbidden territory only if sexual relations occur outside marriage. This is mainly because, firstly, extramarital sexual relations (*zina*) are criminalised under Moroccan law (art. 490), reflecting the state's control over

personal intimacy (Foucault 1975, 1976; Dialmy 2010). Secondly, informal social sanctions uphold respectability, especially for girls, whose status is closely tied to virginity and modesty (Dialmy 1985, 1988, 2005; Namaane-Guessous 1990; Abu-Lughod 2016; Menin 2024). Nonetheless, Menin (2024) discusses how themes of love and intimacy serve as transformative forces, inspiring new modes of expression among the girls and challenging existing social norms, thus opening alternative spaces for Muslim femininity.

The rise of technologies, especially social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, for the youngest users has created new spaces for exploration, comparison, and the expression of new ways of being young Muslim women and of engaging with the world around them (Menin 2024). This trend has been particularly pronounced after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, which further accelerated online relational behaviours (Favretto, Tomelleri and Maturo 2021; Minozzi et al. 2021). Within this historical and social context, the girls interviewed shared different life stories, but at times they revealed the inevitable influence of the world in which they grew up and live, leading to a dynamic interaction and dialogue between ethical and moral norms.

Although many anthropological studies on gender and religion exist (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 2016; Menin 2012, 2024), this work's unique contribution lies in the life stories of girls who share their experiences. Their stories reveal the ambivalences and complexities of being young Muslim women raised in Morocco at the start of the twenty-first century, illustrating conflicts ranging from intergenerational tensions to issues involving social and religious institutions, the Muslim community, and themselves. Interwoven with these emotions and challenges, there is a sense of well-being and relief, rooted in teachings from school, family, and core Islamic sources (the Qur'an and *Hadiths*), which continually evolve within each girl's personal relationship with her faith. Therefore, these experiences bring to light themes such as the body (as a site of subjective ritual action and the exercise of power), romantic and sexual relationships, the intentionality of actions, and epistemic agency.

It will be interesting to examine in-depth themes related to conflict and intergenerational differences among women, since, according to studies such as those by Menin (2012, 2024), Moroccan Muslim women have experienced sweeping social, political, and economic changes in recent years. These changes inevitably affect how they express their Islamic faith and femininity. Nonetheless, there is also evidence of continuity with certain discursive traditions, on which it could be interesting to conduct more in-depth studies.

The aim of my thesis was to bring forward other stories that testify to these changes, as well as to the complexity and heterogeneity of being Muslim girls in Morocco in the early twenty-first century. I decided to begin with the Islamic faith and, more broadly, to explore the theme of religion because it touches on many facets of an individual's daily life, from mental to physical aspects. Additionally, religion serves as a lens for examining the social and political power dynamics of a particular time and place – particularly evident in gendered social and legal dynamics.

The choice to use semi-structured interviews, sometimes even unstructured ones, was also driven by the desire to give the girls the freedom to choose which topics were relevant for them to discuss and share. In this way, with no small amount of difficulty, this research suggests and reinforces the theses highlighting the complexity of the Muslim religion, gender relations, and power dynamics, as well as the complexity of Morocco's social, religious, political, and economic history.

The privilege of being a “halfie” (Subedi 2006; Abu-Lughod 2008), a young Muslim woman (for some peers), and of speaking *Darija* has allowed me to access conversations that the average Western anthropologist might find difficult to have, especially if they are men – given their limited, if not absent, opportunities to engage in this type of conversation with Muslim women in Morocco.

While writing my thesis, I inevitably had ethical doubts about my right and privilege to write about and interpret life stories, emotions, visions, and sentiments that are so intimate and profound – especially because, as we have seen, they are

closely connected to power relations. As discussed by various anthropologists, including Abu-Lughod (2016), although my aim was to give voice to these girls and to highlight the complexity of the Islamic religion and the multiple ways in which Muslim women identify themselves, I wonder to what extent this can also be beneficial for the girls I interviewed. Of course, all of them provided consent to use our conversation for this research, indicating their willingness to share their stories and points of view beyond our private and intimate space.

I am truly grateful for the help and trust they placed in me; in every conversation, I feel I learned a lot, even beyond the research topic and the research itself – these were precious moments that filled and warmed my heart. I remember that with some girls, at the end of our chat, they exclaimed, “It feels like I have been to the psychologist!” and amidst laughter and gratitude, I thought about how fortunate I was to share those moments and conversations with them.

The need to extract interpretative analyses that fit within academic discourses, as well as within drafting regulations that follow specific schemes, has made presenting a “neutral” and pure account complex. I realise that it is inevitable, but it has led to various difficulties, both in the structural organisation of the work and in the analytical and drafting phases (Clifford 1986; Geertz 1988).

Even the necessity of translating the conversations, most of which took place in *Darija*, inherently involves an interpretative process and affects the core of the expressed word, which, in the native language, is rich with historical and social context (Asad 1986a; Crapanzano 1986). This has brought me face to face with the complexity of every context, every subjectivity, and every story, making me realise that, although limited and sometimes contradictory, it remains important to document and promote the circulation of voices, especially as a counter-narrative to femonationalist (Farris 2017) and orientalist discourses (Said 1978; Mahmood 2009; Abu-Lughod 2013). Therefore, despite certain contradictions, it is essential to translate them into colonial languages that are understood in Western countries and around the world (Spivak 1988).

Living in a rapidly changing world, with fragile, easily manipulable discursive boundaries and narratives, makes it difficult to fit them into comprehensive, representative story frameworks. The complexity of the narratives, emotions, and stories I have chosen to share in this work reflects the heterogeneity and uniqueness of what truly constitutes every girl, Islam and Morocco. Therefore, as repeatedly noted throughout this work and as anthropologists have long argued, it is not possible to generalise or simplify such complex stories, narratives, issues, and religions (Geertz 1968; El-Zein 1977; Eickelman 1982; Abu-Lughod 2008; Mahmood 2005; Marcotte 2010; Lukens-Bull 2016; Menin 2024).

One week after my return to Italy in September 2023, a strong earthquake struck the Marrakech-Safi region in the south-central part of the country, causing extensive damage, including deaths, injuries, and the destruction of homes. It was a traumatic event, deeply felt by the Moroccan population, but it also highlighted structural deficiencies in rural areas (the most affected by the earthquake) and the Makhzen's inadequate investment in rebuilding the lives and dignity of those affected (Haddad et al. 2024). This underscores ongoing issues with the uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure across Moroccan territory (Hibou 2006; Raoui and Ibourk 2025), emphasising the ancient divisions and differences between *bilād al-makhzan* and *bilād al-siba* (Gellner 1969; Loimeier 2013).

Continuing in chronological order, another significant event is the launch of new reforms to the *Moudawwana* in March 2024, which aim to expand women's rights within the family and to provide effective tools for implementing the previous 2004 reform (Ennaji 2010; Vandermeulen 2024). This also highlights a shift in the priorities of political and public debate, which differ from those before the NRI's electoral victory over the PJD in the 2021 elections (Masbah 2021), marking further significant changes to Moroccan political, economic, social, and religious history.

The last and significant episode, which fits into a broader context, was the protests by Generation Z 212 in autumn 2025. In a world where governments are

responding less and less to the needs of the people, the Moroccan Generation Z – born between the late nineties and the second decade of the 2000s – took to the streets of Morocco to demand urgent structural reforms in healthcare and education, to seek recognition of the right to expression, to call for the dissolution of the government, and to fight against institutional corruption (Feixa et al. 2022; Van Mer Maesen 2025).

From Bangladesh to Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Madagascar, Serbia, Argentina, and Peru, as well as numerous squares and streets throughout Europe, younger generations have, more or less violently and with varying degrees of success, raised their voices. They demand greater rights and recognition for a more certain and stable future, opposing a present increasingly marked by state violence, wars, and genocides (Chenoweth and Cebul 2026).

Returning, then, to Morocco and to young Muslim women, and highlighting their perspectives, reflections, desires, imaginations, and what they deem most important, is crucial to better understanding their lived experiences and emotions. Approaches such as listening, dialogue, acceptance, solidarity, and non-judgement are essential for dismantling power hierarchies and acknowledging the world of subjectivities, which, in turn, shape the world.

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