



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

#Bismillah
NEThnography of Morocco's Islam-Oriented Contexts
Between Online and Offline

Eleonora Landucci



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Doctoral Programme in Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Philology and Communication

Eleonora Landucci

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NEThnography of Morocco's Islam-Oriented Contexts
Between Online and Offline

Thesis Submitted in December 2024 in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Anthropology

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Alle mie radici.

*"Face à des situations
où la plupart des acteurs font prévaloir sur une activité sociale un regard qui la naturalise,
le sociologue, en posant un certain type de questions, peut faire réapparaître
l'arbitraire et l'indétermination que cette naturalisation a niés".*

Cyril Lemieux. *Problématiser. In L'enquête sociologique*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2012, p. 29.

*"Anthropology demands the open-mindedness
with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment,
and wonder that which one would not have been able to guess".*

Margaret Mead. *Anthropology: A Human Science: selected papers 1939-1960*, New York: Van Nostrand, 1964, p. 10.

*"I wish it need not have happened in my time", said Frodo.
"So do I", said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times.
But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us".*

John R.R. Tolkien. *Lord of The Rings, The Fellowship of The Ring*. London: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 51.

Thesis Abstract in English

#Bismillah

NEThnography of Morocco's Islam-oriented Contexts Between Online and Offline

In Morocco, the religious and political authority is centralized in the monarch, who holds the title of *amīr al-mu'minīn* (Commander of the Faithful). The king embodies the three components of Islamic symbolic capital: legal scholarship (*'ilm*), spiritual power (*baraka*), and sacral nobility from prophetic descent (Sharifism). These elements laid the foundation for the nation-building process following Moroccan independence, crystallizing around the motto “*Allah, al-waṭan, al-malik*” (“God, the Nation, the King”) as a cornerstone of the country's national identity. This unique has established Islam in Morocco as a normative framework—a project for social organization inherently linked to the monarchy. Religious institutions, intermediary bodies, and civil society actors—referred to in this thesis as Islam-oriented groups—navigate this normative framework to gain visibility and negotiate their roles within society. The onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020 disrupted the physical spaces for these groups, prompting a significant shift towards the use of digital media, particularly social networks, to maintain connections with their audiences.

Drawing on a NEThnography of Islam-oriented groups in their online and offline contexts, this thesis investigates phenomena of dematerialization, digital mediation, and virtualization of discourses and practices. The pandemic's “social bubble” amplified the existing tendency of online spheres to form enclosed interactional contexts, where individuals foster shared perspectives and reinforce uniform worldviews. This sudden restrictions on social life had a significant impact on Islam-oriented groups, triggering processes identified in the thesis as the hybridization of spaces, the resemiotization of interactions. This has reconfigured the ways in which individuals perceive and define themselves, frames within a sociopolitical and cultural context where the normative framework of Moroccan Islam defines the boundaries of identity. By examining the interplay between social structures and individual actions, this thesis offers a valuable lens to explore how power is constructed, configured, and negotiated. This perspective shed light on the processes through which agency and power are continuously redefined in the Moroccan society.

Keywords: Morocco; Islam-oriented groups; online and offline contexts; hybridization; resemiotization; subjectivity; power construction.

Résumé de la thèse en français

#Bismillah

NEThnographie des groupes islamiques au Maroc dans leurs contextes online et offline

Au Maroc, l'autorité religieuse et politique est centralisée entre les mains du monarque, qui porte le titre d'*amīr al-mu'minīn* (Commandeur des croyants). Le roi incarne les trois composantes du capital symbolique islamique : la connaissance juridique (*'ilm*), le pouvoir spirituel (*baraka*) et la noblesse sacrée issue de la descendance prophétique (chérifisme). Ces éléments ont constitué les bases du processus de construction nationale après l'indépendance, se cristallisant autour de la devise "*Allah, al-waṭan, al-malik*" (« dieu, la nation, le roi »), qui demeure un pilier de l'identité nationale marocaine. Cette particularité régionale a fait de l'islam au Maroc un cadre normatif, à savoir un projet d'organisation sociale intrinsèquement lié à la monarchie. Les institutions religieuses, les corps intermédiaires et les acteurs de la société civile—désignés dans cette thèse groupes Islam-orientés—évoluent au sein de ce cadre normatif, cherchant à obtenir de la visibilité et à négocier leur rôle dans la société. L'arrivée de la pandémie de COVID en 2020 a bouleversé les espaces physiques de ces groupes, entraînant un recours aux médias numériques, notamment aux réseaux sociaux, pour maintenir le lien avec leurs publics.

Centrée sur une NEThnographie des groupes islamiques dans leurs contextes online et offline, cette thèse explore les phénomènes de dématérialisation, de médiation numérique et de virtualisation des pratiques et des discours. La « bulle sociale » créée par la pandémie a intensifié la tendance des sphères online à former des contextes interactionnels clos, où les individus construisent des perspectives partagées et renforcent des visions du monde univoques. Les restrictions soudaines imposées à la vie sociale ont eu un impact significatif sur les acteurs islam-orientés, déclenchant des processus que cette thèse identifie comme une hybridation des espaces et une resémiotisation des interactions. Ces dynamiques ont reconfiguré la manière dont les individus perçoivent et définissent leur identité, dans un contexte sociopolitique et culturel où le cadre normatif de l'islam marocain délimite les frontières de l'identité. En analysant l'interaction entre les structures sociales et les comportements individuels, cette thèse propose une lecture approfondie des processus de construction, de configuration et de négociation du pouvoir. Cette approche met en lumière les mécanismes par lesquels l'*agency* et le pouvoir sont continuellement redéfinis au sein de la société marocaine.

Mots-clés : Maroc ; groupes Islam-orientés ; contextes online et offline ; hybridation ; resémiotisation ; subjectivité ; construction du pouvoir.

Resum de la tesi en català

#Bismillah

NEThnografia dels grups islàmics al Marroc en els seus contextos online i offline

Al Marroc, l'autoritat religiosa i política es concentra en mans del monarca, que ostenta el títol d'*amīr al-mu'minīn* (Emir dels Creients). El rei encarna els tres components del capital simbòlic islàmic: el coneixement jurídic (*'ilm*), el poder espiritual (*baraka*) i la noblesa sagrada derivada de la descendència profètica (xarifisme). Aquests elements han constituït les bases del procés de construcció nacional després de la independència, cristal·litzant-se al voltant de la divisa "*Allah, al-waṭan, al-malik*" («déu, nació, rei»), que segueix sent un pilar central de la identitat nacional marroquina. Aquesta especificitat regional ha fet de l'islam al Marroc un marc normatiu, un projecte d'organització social intrínsecament vinculat a la monarquia. Les institucions religioses, els òrgans intermedis i els actors de la societat civil—designats en aquesta tesi com a grups Islam-orientats—actuen dins d'aquest marc normatiu a través de discursos i accions específiques per obtenir visibilitat i negociar el seu rol dins la societat. L'arribada de la pandèmia de la COVID l'any 2020 va alterar profundament els espais físics d'actuació d'aquests grups, provocant un ús creixent dels mitjans digitals, especialment les xarxes socials, per mantenir el contacte amb els seus públics.

Centrada en una NEThnografia grups islàmics en els seus contextos online i offline, aquesta tesi analitza els fenòmens de desmaterialització, mediació digital i virtualització de les pràctiques i discursos. La «bombolla social» creada per la pandèmia va intensificar la tendència de les esferes online a generar contextos d'interacció tancats, on els individus construeixen perspectives compartides i reforcen visions del món homogènies. Les restriccions sobtades imposades a la vida social van tenir un impacte significatiu en aquests actors, desencadenant processos que aquesta tesi identifica com a hibridació dels espais i resemiotització de les interaccions. Aquestes dinàmiques han reconfigurat la manera com els individus perceben i defineixen la seva identitat, en un context sociopolític i cultural on el marc normatiu de l'islam marroquí delimita els límits de la subjectivitat. Analitzant la interacció entre les estructures socials i les accions individuals, aquesta tesi ofereix una anàlisi profunda dels processos de construcció, configuració i negociació del poder, posant de manifest els mecanismes mitjançant els quals l'agència i el poder es redefeixen contínuament dins la societat marroquina.

Paraules clau: Marroc; grups *Islam-oriented*; contextos online i offline; hibridació; resemiotització; subjectivitat; construcció del poder.

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*

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*

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*

Infine, ringrazio me, ché ce l’ho fatta.

Translation and Transliteration

Deciding whether, how, and when to translate is not straightforward. Translation involves methodological, ethical, and often political decisions. To earn an international doctoral degree, this thesis was composed in both English and French. I personally translated all quotations from non-English texts. This approach was also applied to the ethnographic material. Interviews conducted in various languages, including French, Spanish, English, and Moroccan Arabic, as well as the field journals written in French and Italian, were translated into English. This decision was based on a practical rationale that allowed me to forego presenting both the original texts and their English translations. However, this choice raises ethical concerns about the cultural hegemony of languages like English and French in academic research. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge that this hegemonic status can lead to the exclusion of different perspectives and the marginalization of local knowledge, perpetuating global power imbalances.

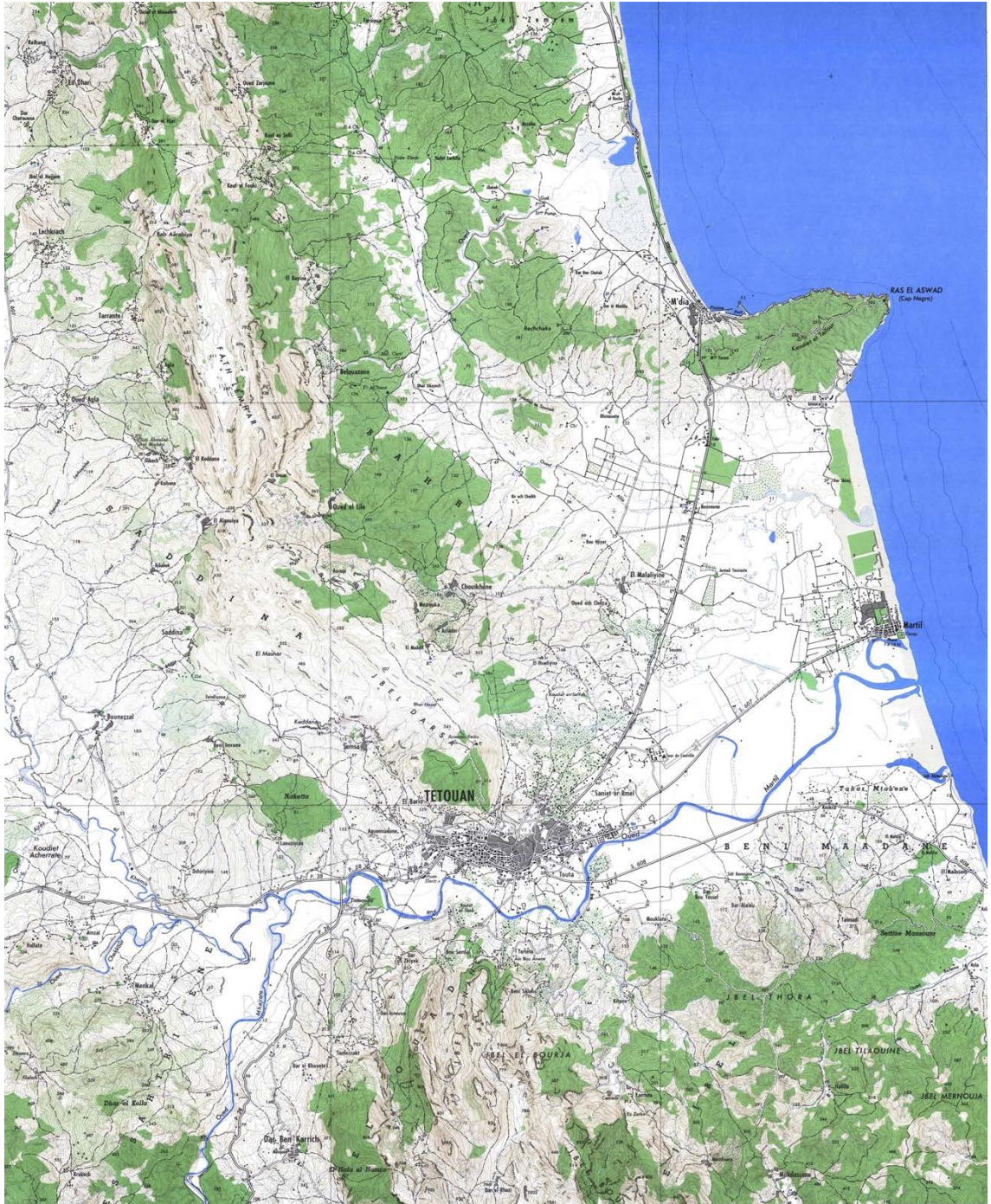
Concerning the transliteration, all Arabic words have been transliterated according to the system outlined in the table below, with exceptions for words that already have an established spelling. Some terms were transliterated based on their Moroccan Arabic pronunciation. Additionally, place names were transcribed according to their spelling on maps and road signs in Morocco. I performed all translations myself.

Arab script	Transliteration	Arab script	Transliteration
ع	' (except at the beginning of a word)	ص	s
أ	ā	ض	d
ب	b	ط	t
ت	t	ظ	dh
ث	th	ع	ʿ
ج	j	غ	gh
ح	h	ف	f
خ	kh	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	z	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	sh	و	ū (long vowel) w (consonant)
		ي	ī (long vowel) y (consonant)

Maps



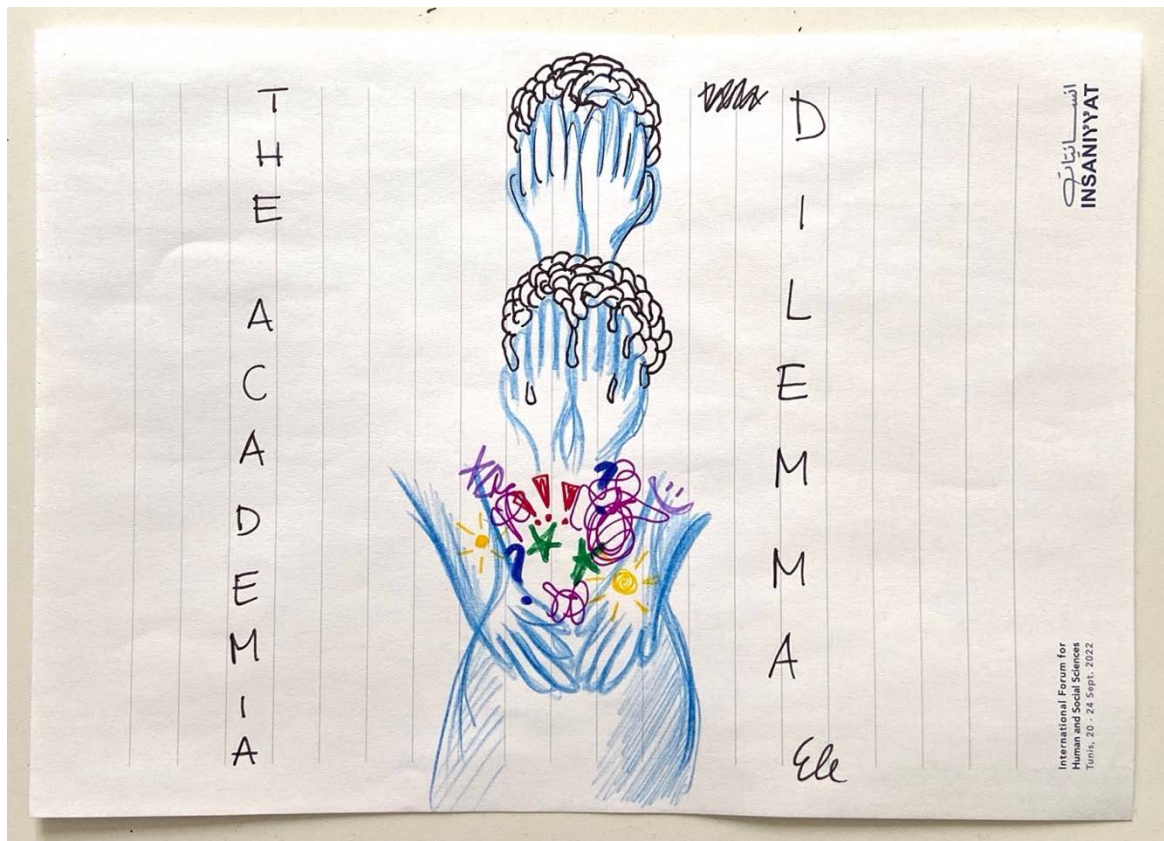
Maps 1 Kingdom of Morocco. Source: GIS Geography



Maps 2 Province of Tétouan. Source: SIREDD Tangier Tétouan Al Hoceima

INTRODUCTION

MEDIATING



Cov. 1 Drawing by Eleonora Landucci created during the workshop “Creativity in Times of Crisis: Positionality and Ethics in Moroccan Ethnographies”, led by Eleonora Landucci and Lena Richter, and presented at the Insaniyyat Conference (Tunis, September 20–24, 2022).

It was in 2019 that I first heard about the MIDA project. At the time, I was living in France and applying for doctoral contracts across Europe. When I came across MIDA's call for doctoral positions, I was immediately drawn to the acronym: "Mediating Islam in the Digital Age". The project itself piqued my intellectual curiosity, but what truly caught my attention was the use of the word "mediating" ... Why? What kind of mediation was involved in this project? Why was that verb chosen as the focal point of the title? Clearly, it carried significant weight. As I would later discover, "mediating" wasn't just relevant to the project, it structured every detail of it. Over the years of working on this thesis, "mediating" evolved into a guiding principle: mediating in the sense of conveying and communicating ideas, facilitating outcomes through different mediums, and ultimately negotiating compromises. This thesis has been an extended exercise in mediation—between ideas, perspectives, and challenges. In the end, it has been both an academic journey and a profound life lesson.

THE MIDA PROJECT

The research behind this thesis had unique origins. Unlike many PhD projects, which are typically conducted independently¹, my doctoral research emerged from a collective endeavor within a larger framework. It originated as part of the MIDA project, short for “Mediating Islam in the Digital Age” (MIDA). MIDA was a research initiative that ran from March 2019 to February 2023, aimed at exploring, according to the project’s Grant Agreement, “how digitization and technological innovations impact Islam, including its beliefs, practices, social institutions, and scholarly research, addressing three primary research questions: how digitization shapes Islam’s beliefs, practices, societies, political organizations, and social institutions; how digitization modifies the relationship Muslims have with their past; and how digitization reorganizes scholarship and research on Islam” (*MIDA Grant Agreement* 2018, 119).

1.1 The Project

As part of the Horizon 2020 (H2020) research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), the Innovative Training Network “Mediating Islam in the Digital Age” (ITN-MIDA) was funded through grant agreement no. 813547. Behind these nomenclatures lies the world’s second-largest funding scheme², created by the European Commission, the executive body of the European Union, to support and promote research and technological innovation (Abbott 2020). Within this program, the MSCA consists of major research fellowships dedicated to fostering research and innovation through cross-border and

¹ This is largely due to the nature of a PhD, which emphasizes independent research, requiring scholars to develop and execute their own original projects. In anthropology, this is particularly true because of the field’s focus on solo ethnographic fieldwork, where researchers spend extended periods immersed in a community. While there are increasingly more exceptions to this trend, as I elaborate in Part 1 of this thesis, traditional methods still prioritize individual engagement, reinforcing the solitary nature of anthropological research.

² Horizon 2020, which ran from 2014 to 2020, had a budget of nearly €80 billions. Horizon Europe, which is the successor to Horizon 2020 and runs from 2021 to 2027, has a budget of €95.5 billion. See the official website of EU fundings, <https://eufundingoverview.be/funding/horizon-2020-horizon-europe>.

cross-sectoral research and training³. One of the funding schemes under the MSCA is the Innovative Training Network (ITN), designed to bring together academic and non-academic bodies in collaborative projects to train junior researchers, equipping them with both scientific expertise and non-scientific skills.

MIDA was granted as an ITN. The project involved an international consortium of research institutes, universities, and non-academic partners across five European countries⁴, and included a training program for young researchers designed to equip them with the necessary skills to navigate the digital transformations affecting Islam. Hence, MIDA brought together 15 Early Stage Researchers (ESRs) from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including anthropology, sociology, political science, history, art history, and literary studies. Each ESR was recruited based on a pre-defined project designed by the consortium⁵. These individual projects were grouped into a series of Work Packages (WPs), each focused on thematic areas within the broader research framework⁶. Over the course of the project, each WP was monitored through the issuing of specific outcomes, or “deliverables”, which refer to concrete outputs—such as reports, publications, and disseminations—that contribute to addressing the research questions of the broader project. These deliverables were consistently submitted through the European Commission’s portal, where their relevance and quality were evaluated.

The PhD project I applied for, titled *Islamist Movements in Morocco in Their ‘Other Languages’: Uses of Arabic and Berber Vernacular Varieties in Digital Spheres*, was classed as ESR project no. 4 within Work Package 2, “Languages and Translations”. This research aimed to focus specifically on the linguistic anthropology of Islamist movements in the predominantly Tamazight-speaking region of northern Morocco⁷. The core objective of ESR project no. 4

³ In the MSCA programs, researchers’ mobility is a mandatory requisite, and partnerships between academic and non-academic university is highly valued.

⁴ The ITN was coordinated by the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS) in France and included twelve beneficiaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Fondacija Kulturno Naslijeđe Bez Granica*), France (*Institut de Recherche pour le Développement*), Germany (*Freie Universität Berlin*, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Philipps Universität Marburg), the Netherlands (*Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, *Radboud Universiteit*, *Universiteit Leiden*, *Universiteit van Amsterdam*, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*), and Spain (*Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*).

⁵ For a comprehensive list of projects, see *MIDA Grant Agreement*, G.A. No. 813547 (2018): Part B1, pages 17-22.

⁶ The complete list of work packages is as follows: WP1 Narratives of the Self, WP2 Languages and Translations, WP3 Images and Materiality in Islam, WP4 Contested Authority and Knowledge Production, WP5 Mobility and Mobilization, WP6 Management, WP7 Training, WP8 Communication, Dissemination, and Outreach, WP9 Open Research Data, and WP10 Ethics Requirements. The first five encompass the 15 individual projects led by the 15 ESRs and their WP leaders. WP6, 7, and 8 focus on management, training, and scientific dissemination. The final two address specific EU project requirements concerning open access and ethics, which I will explore further in chapter 2 and subchapter 3.1 of this thesis.

⁷ For an overview of Morocco’s sociolinguistic landscape and its sociolinguistic policies, politics, and ideologies, see chapter 1.

was to investigate the sociolinguistic dimensions of these Islamist movements, particularly their use of local Arabic and Tamazight vernaculars in digital spaces, and to analyze how these language practices intersect with broader political, cultural, and social dynamics in the region⁸. As is readily apparent, each project was designed to dialogue with the other individual projects within and beyond its own work package, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration⁹.

As a research *and* training project, one of MIDA's distinctive features was its comprehensive approach to preparing the 15 Early Stage Researchers (ESR) programs, workshops, and research stays, each serving two main goals. On one hand, these activities were designed to help ESRs build specific skills and methods tailored to the individual and collective needs of the projects. This included adapted research stays, called “secondments”, with non-academic partners from both private and public sectors¹⁰, and winter and summer schools organized by MIDA in collaboration with other bodies¹¹. On the other hand, a key aspect of the project was its integration of theoretical inquiry with innovative digital research methods and tools. MIDA placed particular emphasis on Digital Humanities (DH), which merges traditional humanities with digital tools and techniques (such as data analysis, digitization, and social media scraping) to explore historical, social, and cultural phenomena while advancing new investigative approaches in social sciences.

MIDA, therefore, was not just about conducting “classic” PhD research; it was more about training and acquiring skills to navigate the complexities of how Islam is mediated in the digital age and to provide critical reflections on these transformations. The project's structure emphasized the development of transferable skills—applicable both within and beyond academia—and hands-on experience, equipping researchers with multimodal and interdisciplinary tools to engage critically, both theoretically and methodologically, with the project's core research questions. In other words, the emphasis was as much on interdisciplinary skill-building and collaboration across academic and non-academic sectors as it was on producing a PhD dissertation. Another significant aspect of the project was the exploration of Islam in its broader socio-cultural, historical, and political dimensions, rather than limiting it solely as a religion. Islam was understood within the project as a normative

⁸ Chapter II further deepens the evolution of my research question.

⁹ For a detailed explanation of these intersections, see *MIDA Grant Agreement*, G.A. No. 813547 (2018): Part B1, pages 17-22.

¹⁰ Among these partners, Al Jazeera Media Institute, Brill, Casa Árabe, and the Centre Pompidou. See *MIDA Grant Agreement*, G.A. No. 813547 (2018): 110.

¹¹ Among these bodies, the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS), the University of Catania (Italy), and the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta (Indonesia).

framework that has evolved through distinct phases over time, both in majority and non-majority Muslim countries¹².

1.11 The Impact

This brief overview of the MIDA project introduces key reflections on the social and political impact of MSCA projects that have shaped my doctoral journey and this thesis. These reflections have not only been central to my research experience but also provide valuable insights into the role of the researcher and the nature of social science research within a publicly funded framework. MIDA stands out as a unique project, not just for its content but also for its context. It was the only project in the social sciences and humanities to receive ITN funding in its application year, as ITNs are typically awarded to projects in technology and the hard sciences. This highlights MIDA's success in convincing the European Commission of the relevance of its research, its methodological innovation, and its ability to meet scientific challenges. However, this recognition also brought challenges, particularly in navigating H2020's bureaucratic structures and expectations, more closely aligned with technical disciplines, in the context of an ITN, than with the context-driven nature of social science research¹³.

One of the major challenges MIDA faced, external to the ITN structure, was the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID), which has disrupted the world between 2020 and 2021¹⁴. MIDA, being based on an international training network with events scheduled across various countries, was severely impacted. The closing of borders made it impossible for researchers to attend these events, forcing a profound reevaluation of the project and its execution methods. This had consequences not only on a practical level but also challenged the very concept of conducting research in a globally interconnected context. The crisis underscored how rigid, pre-established structures of projects like MSCA-ITN could be challenged by unforeseen events, emphasizing the need for more flexible approaches in research management¹⁵.

¹² The ESR projects cover a historical scope ranging from the medieval period to the present day, with a focus on online and offline spheres on territories such as Al-Andalus (Spain), the Muslim community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslim diaspora in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, and Turkey, among others.

¹³ An example of this dissonance can be found in the standardized ethical guidelines set forth by the H2020 research ethics framework. See chapter 2 and subchapter 3.1.

¹⁴ For a discussion on the impact of COVID on my research, see Part 1.

¹⁵ A key challenge emerged when the project was extended by a year due to the pandemic but was not followed by unanimous contract extensions for the 15 ESRs, due to significant difficulties arising from the

Another significant challenge, inherent to MSCA projects, was integrating the academic and non-academic sectors. Horizon 2020 introduced an innovative funding framework designed to support research that not only advances scientific knowledge but also delivers tangible social impact. This responded to the underlying principle that science advances for the collective well-being of humanity. In MSCA projects, this principle was both theoretically endorsed and practically enforced, with concrete resources provided to ensure its implementation. In the MIDA project, this vision materialized through secondments at non-academic institutions, the promotion of broader scientific dissemination, and a strong commitment to open-access publishing. For instance, MIDA dedicated an entire work package to these efforts, with a specific budget allocated to support dissemination and open access activities¹⁶.

However, these efforts to bridge the academic and non-academic spheres also brought broader ethical concerns to the surface. A key example is the scientific publishing system, particularly Open Access publications (OA), strongly promoted by MSCA projects. While OA expands access to scientific articles and has the potential to democratize knowledge, it also comes with certain drawbacks. While fully free open-access models exist, they remain limited, and many publishers continue to impose significant financial burdens on researchers who, without substantial funding, cannot afford OA publication fees. This raises a critical concern: although projects like MIDA allocate specific funds to cover these costs, they inadvertently support an industry that monopolizes scientific publications, creating issues of fairness and restricting the free flow of knowledge¹⁷.

On the one hand, these obstacles highlight the need to reflect on how research can genuinely reach a wider audience and foster a more inclusive dialogue with society. Despite these challenges, MSCA projects stand out for implementing concrete measures to bridge the gap between academia and the non-academic world. In a landscape where few research programs demonstrate such a strong commitment to integrating these two areas, MSCA

differences in national regulations and the policies of their respective universities or research centers. This led to administrative inconsistencies and complications, highlighting the need for more flexible, customized solutions to sustain the research.

¹⁶ I am referring to WP8 Communication, Dissemination, and Outreach and WP9 Open Research Data. See *MIDA Grant Agreement*, G.A. No. 813547 (2018): Part B1, pages 17-22.

¹⁷ Universities and research centers are beginning to issue warnings about so-called “predatory publishing” as well as certain open access publications that display speculative tendencies (Frank, Foster, and Pagliari 2023). For further details, see Arash Abizadeh “Academic journals are a lucrative scam – and we’re determined to change that”, *The Guardian*, July 16, 2024

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/16/academic-journal-publishers-universities-price-subscriptions>

represents a significant example of how theoretical principles can be put into practice, promoting knowledge transfer and cooperation across different sectors.

On the other hand, the integration between academic and non-academic spheres can encourage a shift in viewing the researcher as an active agent in driving social progress. MSCA, and especially ITNs projects, do not view the researcher as an isolated figure confined to the lab, but rather as an actor embedded in a broader context, capable of engaging and collaborating with a variety of entities, both academic and non-academic. One of the most remarkable aspects of the MIDA project, which made me deeply believe in its value, was its collective and collaborative nature. From the outset, MIDA was conceived as the result of an international consortium, where individual research projects were closely interconnected, creating an active and concrete exchange network among participants—something rarely seen in traditional research contexts. This collaborative environment was particularly stimulating, offering a support network and intellectual stimuli from senior researchers from various backgrounds and colleagues from different countries and universities across Europe¹⁸.

This scenario was made possible not only by MIDA's collaborative structure but also by the substantial material support, primarily financial, provided by MSCA projects¹⁹. This underscores the contrast with the precarious reality faced by many researchers in Europe, particularly in the South, where fewer doctoral contracts are available, and those that exist often come with near-minimum wages. Additionally, research resources are frequently inadequate, forcing many researchers to personally fund their work. Projects funded by Horizon 2020, while presenting virtuous salary and funding models, implicitly highlight inequalities between researchers in different national contexts and raise important questions about the state of academic research in Europe. This calls for a broader rethinking of research funding policies across Europe to ensure that even researchers outside of international programs like Horizon 2020 can access proper working conditions and adequate resources to conduct their research.

Another key point to highlight is that Horizon 2020, like the new Horizon Europe program, was overseen by the European Commission, whose role is to support European

¹⁸ The monitoring and mentoring structure of ESRs in the MIDA project ensured that each ESR had at least two supervisors from different WPs and was consistently encouraged to collaborate with fellow ESRs across WPs. This enriched their experience with an international, multidisciplinary academic environment and fostered a network that extended beyond the project, enhancing collaboration beyond the consortium.

¹⁹ Researchers involved in H2020 projects, despite variations based on their country of affiliation, were compensated according to salaries indexed to the European average, with additional allowances for mobility and family support. Furthermore, funds allocated for research, training, and dissemination were kept separate from personal salaries.

Parliament's political agendas. This sets Horizon research programs apart from their national counterparts, as it implies that these projects are not detached from economic and social agendas defined by the European Union. On the one hand, this allows scientific research to play an active role in shaping European policies and contribute innovative solutions to both continental and global challenges. On the other hand, it raises the critical question of which types of projects and themes are prioritized in EU funding, based on economic, social, and political priorities, namely, in the context of the increased attention to radical political movements associated with Islam after 9/11. If it is considered that one of the reasons behind the EU's investment in projects like MIDA is to strategically respond to evolving challenges, then the ethical and, ultimately, political questions surrounding a project like MIDA call for attentive consideration.

This project had to navigate the complex interplay between knowledge production, power dynamics, and global inequalities, in a context shaped by growing nationalist sentiments and various forms of Islamophobia. In this context, MIDA has effectively maintained scientific rigor and intellectual honesty, while remaining aware of the potential impact of its research findings. From the outset, MIDA has demonstrated a rigorous scientific approach, grounded in empirical analysis and critical theoretical reflection, without overlooking the political and ethical implications of its work. For example, the consortium addressed the issue of the project's funding by Global North countries to study the Global South²⁰ by making a concerted effort to overcome this asymmetry, focusing on fostering equitable and reciprocal collaboration and promoting a more collaborative and inclusive research model²¹.

The epistemological, methodological, and ethical reflections that shaped the MIDA project have led to a significant rethinking of the researcher's role—not just as a scholar, but as a critical and engaged social actor. These considerations have also played a pivotal role in the evolution of my research question, steering it toward new paths of inquiry. In the next section, I will examine how these elements converged to refine and reshape my initial research focus, ultimately paving the way for new directions in my work.

²⁰ Many of the countries analyzed were from the Maghreb, Mashreq, or the Near East.

²¹ This tangible achievement is evidenced by the fact that more than half of the Early Stage Researchers (ESRs) involved came from Muslim-majority countries and/or held non-European passports. This created a platform where researchers from the Global South, including 5 women, were not merely subjects of study but active participants in the dialogue.

ONE, NO ONE, AND ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND (RESEARCH) QUESTIONS

The title of this section is inspired by *“Uno, Nessuno e Centomila”*, a novel by Italian playwright and novelist Luigi Pirandello, first published in 1926. The story follows a man who, after a seemingly trivial comment about his physical appearance, begins to question his sense of identity. He comes to realize that the way others perceive him is vastly different from how he sees himself. Through a series of reflections and events, he concludes that there is no single, stable identity. Instead, each of us is seen differently by every person we interact with, leading him to the realization that he is “one” to himself, “no one” in terms of his previously assumed identity, and “one hundred thousand” to others, as they view him from countless perspectives. I chose this title for the chapter that discusses the evolution of my research problem, as it mirrors the transformative process my study has undergone.

Just as the protagonist of the novel discovers different facets of his own identity, my research has undergone multiple reinterpretations and developments as new perspectives, questions, and contexts emerged. The title symbolically represents the idea that research questions—and their attempted answers—are never final or singular. Rather, they continuously evolve, taking on multiple meanings depending on the moment, context, analytical tools, and the perspective from which they are approached. Building on this realization, the evolution of my research problem has progressed through three key dimensions: my personal, educational, and cultural background; the impact of the COVID pandemic; and my fieldwork experience. These factors have profoundly shaped the direction of my project leading to significant shifts in both objectives and methods.

II.1 Development of the Research Focus

From the outset, my research focus has undergone several transformations, shaped by various factors. As outlined in chapter I, tackling a predefined research topic within the MIDA project presented several challenges. On one hand, it was essential to meet the project’s expectations; on the other hand, it inevitably had to be adapted to the researcher’s expertise

and academic background. The ESR 4 project, for which I was selected, was a typical linguistic anthropology project requiring sociolinguistic proficiency in both Tamazight and Arabic, skills that I did not possess²². The first adjustment to my research focus shifted from an emphasis on language to the study of Islamist modes of action and interaction, both online and offline, in a region of northern Morocco where the Amazigh *enjeux* are not only linguistic but also social and political. The aim was to understand how Islamists manage to attract their audience in areas where religious syncretism and Amazigh linguistic and identity claims are particularly strong.

From the very beginning of my PhD, my research focus was not on Islamist movements openly opposing the Moroccan political system, but rather on those operating within the official political and religious order,—particularly the Justice and Development Party (PJD), Morocco’s main Islamist party²³. The PJD, embodying a form of Islamism that seeks to function within the framework of the Moroccan monarchy—which holds both political and religious authority—represented an ideal case study for examining how power is constructed in Morocco through the dynamics of integration and compromise between Islamism and institutional politics (Desrués and Molina 2013; Hissouf 2016). With this research focus, I had planned exploratory fieldwork at the start of 2020. However, the outbreak of COVID brought the world to a standstill for over a year and a half. As a result, I was only able to travel to Morocco at the end of my PhD, first in late 2021 for an exploratory fieldwork trip, and then for the main fieldwork in 2022.

Unable to travel to Morocco, I reorganized my fieldwork to begin with online ethnography, primarily through social media, which led to further adjustments to my research focus. Initially, I faced significant challenges in connecting with PJD members online²⁴. These obstacles, along with preliminary findings from my online fieldwork, prompted a shift in my research direction. I shifted from studying Islamist political parties and movements to

²² I received my academic training in Italy, specializing in anthropology and Oriental studies, within a context heavily shaped by both functionalist ethnography and cultural anthropology, as well as by Orientalist frameworks, despite attempts to break away from them. I later pursued further studies in France, where I shifted my focus toward social and political anthropology, with particular emphasis on issues like youth, agency, and the public spaces in contemporary Morocco.

²³ For further details about the PJD as political counter-project in Morocco, see Part 2, 5.2.2.

²⁴ Requests for interviews were frequently declined, primarily due to my non-membership in the party. Additionally, the few interviews conducted did not provide enough data to thoroughly explore the research issue. Consequently, this data is largely absent or only marginally addressed in this thesis. However, it is the subject of a published report: see, Douhan, Hayat, Eleonora Landucci, and Lena Richter. “Social Media in Morocco: From Grassroots Activism to Electoral Campaigns”. GIGA Focus Nahost. Hamburg: German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) – Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien, Institut für Nahost-Studien, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.57671/gfme-22042>.

examining groups across various sectors of Moroccan society, all linked by a common thread: the notion of Islam as a social project that should be actively pursued in daily life in both online and offline contexts. In 2020, I began analyzing the Facebook pages of the Organization for Morocco's Student Renewal (OREMA), the student union branch of the PJD. Through my exploration of their pages and online interactions, I noted that the adherence to Islamic principles was framed not primarily as a vehicle for social or political change but as essential moral *and* civic conduct critical for the union's visibility, stability, and continuity. This observation sparked my interest in comparing this group with other entities.

I engaged with Al-Amal, an Islamic women's NGO based in the northern city of Tétouan, which was initially affiliated with the local PJD section but later shifted toward more royalist positions. Through this organization, I was introduced to the third entity examined in this thesis: the Ulema Council of the northern towns of M'diq and Fnideq, local branch of the state-affiliated religious institution²⁵. Despite their significant differences, these three entities—defined in this thesis as “Islam-oriented”²⁶—are united by their commitment to Islam as a social project to be realized in Morocco through various initiatives. Indeed, regardless of whether they emphasize cultural activities, community engagement, or moral actions, these groups operate in accordance with what they classified as the “authentic Islam” (“*al-ṣaḥīḥ*”), or the “Islam of the right middle” (*al-wasatiyya*). As will be developed in this thesis, this classification reflects a normative framework, established in the post-independence period, referred to herein as “Moroccan Islam”²⁷. Thus, the rationale for this research focus was to investigate how a specific normative framework that emerged in Morocco during the independence period is adapted, reinterpreted, and reconfigured by social actors. In summary, my research ultimately focused on the construction of power in Morocco, examining how this power is structured and actively negotiated by the social actors considered in this thesis, across specific online and offline contexts.

As my research progressed, the geographical focus on northern Morocco became less central. While Tétouan remained the physical base for the groups I studied, observing how online and offline activities were imbricated led me to rethink the concept of space. The pandemic played a key role in reshaping both my own and my interlocutors' perceptions of online and offline realms, as their boundaries were continuously redefined. This shift pushed me to move beyond seeing these realms as separate and instead explore the hybridization of

²⁵ For a detailed description of the social actors involved in this thesis, see III.I.

²⁶ I delve into the term “Islam-oriented” in Introduction, III.I.

²⁷ A comprehensive analysis of the concept of “Moroccan Islam” is provided in Part 2, chapter 5.

spaces, where interactions fluidly cross online and offline contexts²⁸. This hybridization, further emphasized by the pandemic, became a central theme of my study. Consequently, I analyzed how expressions and behaviors were adapted across different contexts, a process known as “resemiotization” in sociolinguistics²⁹. Through this lens, I examined how resemiotized interactions and hybrid contexts contribute to reshaping the subjectivity of Islam-oriented social actors, who, in turn, actively reconfigure the interactions and contexts in which they engage³⁰.

II.II Positionality and Reflexivity

One of the key challenges I faced when I first joined the MIDA project was navigating the complex epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues inherent in studying Islamist movements in contemporary Morocco. As a white, European, and non-religious woman, my positionality raised important questions about how I perceived and was perceived in the research context. This prompted critical reflection that shaped, and sometimes redirected, the evolution of my research focus. In anthropology, knowledge production is never neutral or detached. It is intrinsically shaped by the encounter with the “Other”, which includes not only the individuals or communities but also the broader social and cultural environment in which the research unfolds. In this context, identity factors such as gender, geographic and social background, religious and community affiliation, age, and education—both for the researcher and the interlocutors—play a crucial role in shaping fieldwork dynamics. The interaction between the researcher and their interlocutors is fundamental to producing anthropological knowledge. This interaction is always a complex and evolving dialogue, where the researcher’s identity and the perceptions that emerge in the field influence both access to data and the interpretation of that data. As a result, the research process becomes a reciprocal and dynamic exchange that directly impacts how knowledge is constructed.

As previously mentioned, the initial research question outlined by the MIDA project evolved in response to my academic background and specific skill set. This reformulation was shaped also by my social and cultural background, which significantly influenced the direction of the research. The way my interlocutors perceived me, as well as how I perceived myself within the research context, inevitably impacted my access to fieldwork, and the interpretation

²⁸ The paradigm of hybridization is thoroughly examined in chapter 7.

²⁹ Phenomena of resemiotization observed in the field are the focus of chapter 8.

³⁰ Reconfiguration as a performative process in the construction of the self is addressed in chapter 9.

of collected data. This reflexive process, rather than being a hindrance, serves as a crucial tool that must be applied at every stage of the research: before, during, and after fieldwork. One key reason I decided to move away from studying the PJD was the challenge of field access as a white, non-religious woman. The inability to physically travel to Morocco and meet with my interlocutors—what sociologist Erving Goffman refers to as “presentation of the face”³¹—likely heightened this challenge. However, my non-religious identity, along with my family background rooted in both Catholicism and Protestantism, proved to be an asset in engaging with several ulema. These scholars of Islam not only participated in numerous debates with me but also provided in-depth lessons on topics ranging from interpretations of the Bible and the Gospels to the Quran. These two examples demonstrate how the way my interlocutors perceived me, and the context in which those perceptions developed, resulted in two very different outcomes in my fieldwork.

As a woman, I found it easier to connect with the members of Al-Amal, an NGO founded and composed almost exclusively of women. This shared gender dynamic allowed me to engage in daily activities and listen to intimate personal stories, offering insights into experiences that might have otherwise remained inaccessible to me. This dynamic also allowed me access to the women-only prayer spaces in the mosques of M’diq and Fnideq, despite these areas typically being not accessible to non-Muslims. Moreover, my background became a topic of discussion within the OREMA group. Holding an Italian passport and having studied in France and Spain—former colonial powers in Morocco—inevitably shaped my position in the field. My academic journey was often cited by OREMA activists as an example of “successful migration” toward better opportunities for study and life in contexts perceived as more favorable for their future. This debate raised complex questions about my positionality as a researcher. Not only did my European identity evoke colonial memories, but my academic background in countries seen as “gateways” to a better future also generated specific expectations and projections from my interlocutors.

These experiences underscore how the production of anthropological knowledge is deeply shaped by the researcher’s positionality. My presence, undeniably influenced by my cultural and social background, was anything but neutral. In fact, it impacted not only how I gathered data but also the types of relationships I was able to form and whether I was included or excluded from certain contexts. Recognizing my position of privilege as a researcher—the

³¹ One of the key concepts in Goffman’s interactionist sociological theory is that of “face”, understood as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman 1967, 5).

one asking questions and collecting information—prompted important questions about my ability to accurately represent the experiences and voices of the communities I studied. This reflexivity significantly deepened my understanding of the research process, highlighting the need for constant critical reflection on how external factors, which might appear indirectly connected to the research, actually shaped its entire process³². In this context, the research was not just about asking questions and gathering information, but about building relationships based on trust and mutual respect, while acknowledging the autonomy and subjectivity of the interlocutors involved.

³² I explore this topic extensively in Part 1.

ISLAM-ORIENTED HYBRID CONTEXTS

The groups analyzed in this thesis operate in different spheres of the Moroccan society: a non-governmental organization representing civil society, a student union linked to specific social and political movements, and a local ulema council embodying a branch of a state-aligned religious institution. Although these entities may seem distant from one another, they share a common goal: to apply Islam as both a normative structure and a tool for social development in Morocco. All three groups are embedded in Morocco's political-religious framework, where the king holds the highest spiritual and political authority. This framework serves as their common normative reference point: not something they seek to subvert, but rather a system they embrace as a guiding structure. The joint analysis of these entities offers a unique opportunity to explore Islam not as an ideological or religious reference, but rather as a shared social project that guides collective action. These groups, as actors at various levels of the Moroccan public sphere, contribute—both through online and offline interactions—to the creation and consolidation of a space where civil society engages with state institutions.

III.I What? Why?

The Women's NGO Al-Amal

The women's association Al-Amal (*jami'iyya al-'amal al-nisā'iyya*) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that, according to their members, promotes Islamic morals through social and educational support, job reintegration, and charity work, primarily targeting women, victims of domestic violence, poverty, single mothers, children in poverty or orphans, and young people in precarious situations. The association was founded in Tétouan in 1992 by seven women, aged 40 to 60, from the urban middle-upper class, who were already well connected within the city's social and political networks. At the time of the fieldwork³³, Al-Amal was one of the largest Islamic NGOs in the Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima region,

³³ Research ended in December 2022. For further details, see III.II.

with multiple active projects across its three centers in the city funded by local, national, and international organizations. The NGO's board consisted of nine women, aged 40 to 60, and about ten regular volunteers (mostly women), a number that could increase during peak activity periods. The NGO also employed five staff members: two men and two women who handled educational training, and one woman responsible for secretarial duties, treasury, and communication.

The development of Al-Amal mirrors both Morocco's political shifts from the 1990s to the 2020s and changes in development governance and community engagement models. The NGO was founded by individuals closely linked and members of the local section of the PJD, which ruled the county from 2011 to 2021 amid significant political instability. This connection between local political power and community engagement shaped Al-Amal's economic model until 2005, which relied on funding from the party or related lobbying groups, as well as private donations from entities affiliated with the PJD. At the same time, it also received voluntary contributions from sources not directly tied to the PJD. In 2005, following the 2004 family code reform (*mudawwana al-'usra*³⁴), Al-Amal shifted its focus to supporting women from poor or disadvantaged families, adding "feminine" (*al-nisā'iyya*) to its name. That same year, King Mohammed VI's launch of the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) prompted the association to rebrand itself as a local development NGO, allowing it to participate in INDH projects and gain access to its funding³⁵.

This shift in status marked a key evolution in the NGO's economic model, allowing it to secure funding not only from the INDH but also from a broader range of national and international, public, and private sources³⁶. This transformation reflects a broader trend in Global South countries, where neoliberal governance increasingly promotes decentralization and partnerships between public authorities, NGOs, private enterprises, and local actors,

³⁴ The 2004 reform of the Mudawana significantly improved the rights of Moroccan women. It enhanced gender equality in marriage and childcare, introducing joint family responsibility for both spouses instead of just the husband, and limiting women's subordination to male guardianship. Key changes include raising the minimum marriage age for women to 18, sharing property between spouses, strictly controlling polygamy, allowing women to initiate divorce under judicial supervision, and improving inheritance rights. However, cultural norms, traditions, high illiteracy rates, and a lack of legal awareness among women often hinder the effective implementation of these reforms (Sadiqi 2014).

³⁵ INDH is an ongoing national program designed to elevate social standards through three primary objectives: improving access to basic social services in the most impoverished areas, supporting the most vulnerable groups, and promoting Income-Generating Activities (AGRs). AGRs are economic initiatives aimed at producing goods or services that enable marginalized populations to generate a stable income. For a critical analysis of the development governance model shaped by programs like INDH, see Part 3, 7.2.1.

³⁶ For an infographic of the NGO's funding model, see Appendix, 19.

reshaping development processes on the ground (Baron and Hattab-Christmann 2005; Zemni and Bogaert 2006). The restructuring and diversification of the NGO's financial base, moving away from sole reliance on community and political funding, along with the involvement of new social actors on its board, triggered internal conflicts. From 2019 to 2022, tensions within Al-Amal's board and presidency reflected the PJD's declining influence³⁷. Al-Amal's tensions reached a peak in late 2022 with the election of a new board and president for Al-Amal, a decision contested by the former president³⁸. Although not formally affiliated with any party, the new president sympathizes with the monarchist-leaning Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM)³⁹. This leadership change marked an ideological shift for the NGO, moving away from the PJD's "reformist Islamist" stance towards a model more aligned with the Alawite monarchy.

The Student Union Group OREMA

The Organization for Moroccan Student Renewal (*munadhama al-tajdīd al-tullabī*, OREMA) is one of the leading student union organizations in Morocco, founded in 2003, at Moulay Ismail University in Meknes (center-west of the country). OREMA operates across 21 sections in various Moroccan universities and stands out for its "progressive Islamist" orientation⁴⁰. It serves as the student wing of the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), an Islamist organization that fostered the emergence of the PJD and still remains linked to it⁴¹. OREMA is a dominant force in student unionism, effectively controlling the National Union of Moroccan Students (UNEM), the largest student union in the country. Founded in 1956, shortly after Morocco's independence, UNEM began as the union of the nationalist left. UNEM's leadership in the 1960s and 1970s protests under King Hassan II resulted in its ban from 1973 to 1979. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the influence of the leftist student movement declined, the Islamist faction gained control of the union (Vermeren 2016).

³⁷ For further details, see Part 2, 5.2.2.

³⁸ For further details see, Part 3, 7.1.2, 9.1.1, and 9.2.1.

³⁹ The PAM was founded in 2008 by individuals closely tied to the monarchy, including Aziz Akhannouch, who later became Morocco's Prime Minister following the 2021 elections. The party was established with a strategic purpose: to bolster the King's influence within the government by consolidating a loyal political force and to counterbalance the growing electoral success of the PJD (Eibl 2012; Szmolka 2019)

⁴⁰ Definition offered by OREMA's activists during fieldwork.

⁴¹ For further details, see Part 2, 5.2.2.

Despite UNEM's declining influence on Morocco's political landscape, student organizations remain active in many universities, representing a range of political ideologies⁴². At the time of the research, OREMA was the most prominent student union in Tétouan, active since the late 2000s on the campuses of the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Letters at Abdelmalek Essaâdi University⁴³. The Tétouan section comprised about 40 activists (25 men and 15 women) and roughly 180-200 sympathizers aged 18 to 33⁴⁴. The organization's activities were largely confined to campus spaces and student dormitories, seldom extending into the public space⁴⁵. This limitation stems from the fact that student groups in Morocco are officially illegal due to the historically anti-establishment role of student unionism during the protests of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as long as they operate within university grounds, they are implicitly tolerated by the authorities.

Although OREMA's activities (i.e., cultural, charitable, lobbying, and political) are similar to those of other student factions and remain consistent across cities, each group brings its own ideological focus based on its orientation. OREMA distinguishes itself by promoting Islamic knowledge (*'ilm*), religious outreach (*da'wa*), and reform (*islāh*) based on the teachings of the Quran, Sunnah, and Hadith. The group advocates for a reformist Islamist identity, in line with the principles of the PJD and MUR, emphasizing dialogue (*ḥiwār*) and tolerance (*tasāmuh*)⁴⁶. This stance mirrors the PJD's ideology and highlights OREMA's position in student unionism. The union group is tasked with balancing two key responsibilities: representing the political positions of both the PJD and the MUR, which often advocate for compromise with the monarchy, and addressing the concerns of students, which are frequently in tension with institutional authorities. Operating as an intermediary body, OREMA navigates the delicate space between institutional expectations and the demands of the students, especially in a context where student unionism lacks formal recognition in Morocco⁴⁷.

⁴² Alongside OREMA, there are groups such as Justice and Spirituality (*al-'adl wa al-ihsān*, AWI), affiliated to Abdesslam Yassine's movement (see 5.2.2), the Amazigh Cultural Movement (see 5.3.2), and several communist groups, including the Democratic Basists (*al-nahj al-dīmurāfī al-kā'idī*) and the Progressive Basists (*al-kā'idīn at-takadūmīn*).

⁴³ Abdelmalek Essaâdi University (AEU) is the principal university in northern Morocco, comprising 15 institutions, including faculties and *grandes écoles*, spread across the Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima region, established between 1982 and 2017. See the AEU's website, accessed, December 2022, <https://www.uae.ac.ma/histoire>

⁴⁴ Research ended in December 2022. For further details, see III.II.

⁴⁵ The occupation of campus spaces by OREMA is analyzed in detail in Part 3, chapter 7.

⁴⁶ Information gathered from numerous Facebook publication, interviews with the activists, and OREMA's national blog, last accessed, April 2020 <https://www.orema.ma/>.

⁴⁷ The role of OREMA within the university is explored in detail in Part 3, chapter 9.

The Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq

In Islamic tradition, a council of ulema refers to a gathering of multiple *'ālim* (sing. f., *ālīma*; pl. m., *'ulamā'*; pl. f. *ālīmāt*, meaning “learned person” or “scholar”), who are recognized as experts in various religious disciplines, including Islamic theology, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Quranic studies. The ulema are responsible for interpreting and teaching Sharia (Islamic law), Sunna (the teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), and the Quran. Their expertise also extends to theology and religious sciences in a broader sense. Furthermore, their authority is reflected in the issuing of religious rulings (*fatwā*, pl., *fatāwā*), which guide the community of believers on practical issues of daily life, as well as on more complex matters of moral, legal, or spiritual nature⁴⁸. In Morocco, the ulema are officially recognized as religious authorities and integrated into state institutions, playing a key role in regulating religious practices across the country. Following independence and continuing through the early 2000s the training and regulation of the ulema were increasingly subject to a series of reforms designed to align with the monarchy’s principles and interests. These reforms were driven by the monarchy’s recognition that the ulema could simultaneously pose a threat to its authority while also serving as a valuable source of legitimacy if properly controlled and incorporated into the monarchic framework.

To achieve this, a process of institutionalizing and bureaucratizing the ulema was implemented. Independent Islamic educational institutions, such as the University of al-Qarawiyyin, were nationalized, and new institutions were created under direct royal supervision. A notable example is the Dar al-Hadith al-Hassaniya, established in 1964 and closely aligned with the monarchy, which was specifically designed to train ulema. In addition, the ulema were formally organized into the Supreme Council of Ulema, established in 1981, but convened for the first time in 2000, under the direct leadership of the king. This centralization process gained momentum after the 2003 Islamist terrorist attacks in Casablanca⁴⁹. In response, Moroccan authorities launched a series of reform initiatives aimed at further consolidating religious institutions, places of worship, and practices under state control. These reforms, justified as necessary to combat the growing influence of radical Islamism in the country, effectively centralized religious authority under the monarchy. As a

⁴⁸ While the ulema are primarily academic and legal scholars, distinct from imams who predominantly lead communal prayers, there are contexts in which an imam may also serve as an *'ālim*, provided they have undergone the requisite religious education and training.

⁴⁹ For further details, see 5.2.2.

result, the ulema became standardized and bureaucratized, with few exceptions (Dialmy 2000), serving primarily to uphold the priorities of the Palace.

The local Ulema Council of the prefecture of M'diq-Fnideq aligns with this context. At the time of the research, the council, based in M'diq, a coastal town north-east of Tétouan, comprised 9 members (8 men and 1 woman, aged between 50 and 70) who were appointed between 2013 and 2017, and reconfirmed in 2021⁵⁰. Although they received a salary for their roles, this was not their primary occupation. Apart from the woman, an heiress from Tétouan bourgeoisie, most members were university professors specializing in Islamic studies and belonged to the urban upper-class. Starting in 2008, M'diq-Fnideq council established a Women's and Family Affairs Unit (*khalīyya shu 'ūn al-mra' wa-qaḍāyā al-'usra*), fulfilling one of the key objectives of the religious reform initiated by Mohammed VI in 2004. The Women's Affairs Unit of the M'diq-Fnideq council is led by an *ālīma* and includes five *murshidāt* (sing., *murshida*), female religious guides. These women, trained in both Sharia and social psychology, are responsible for providing religious education to women and children.

Although the creation of these women's units was presented as a step towards promoting women's involvement in the religious sphere and advancing gender equality, in line with the Mudawana reform, their primary objective was to strengthen the king's strategy to renew the religious landscape and consolidate a "Moroccan Islam" aligned with the monarchy⁵¹. The *'ālimāt* do not have the authority to issue fatwas, and none of the *murshidāt*, despite their role being comparable to that of imams, has ever delivered a Friday sermon at the mosque—activities reserved exclusively for men. The primary responsibility of the Women's Unit is the organization of women's groups for the *tablīgh*, the dissemination of religious teachings⁵². This includes conveying the core principles of Islam, and the moral and spiritual practices of the faith.

"Islam-oriented"

If every categorization is a social construct shaped by actors situated in specific spatial and temporal contexts (Seniguer 2012), then the act of categorizing can be understood as crystallizing a fluid socio-cultural complexity into defined boundaries. However, categorization is not merely about setting limits; it also serves to represent and define, enabling (mutual)

⁵⁰ Research ended in December 2022. For further details, see III.II.

⁵¹ Chapter 5 provides an in-depth analysis of the concept of "Moroccan Islam".

⁵² For a comprehensive discussion on the social and spatial practices of the ulema council, as well as the other Islam-oriented groups, see Part 3.

recognition (Honneth 2004; 1996). This reflection informed the categorization process undertaken in this thesis. As is often the case in anthropological research, the choice to focus on particular social actors is primarily driven by empirical field observations and practical concerns related to access and the evolving nature of the ethnographic work, rather than by purely theoretical considerations, as discussed in chapter II. As my fieldwork progressed and my research focus evolved, I gradually moved away from the initial idea of studying “Islamism” or “Political Islam” in Morocco, defined as an ideological stance focused on gaining political power by promoting the implementation of Islamic principles across all aspects of governance and society (Campanini 2015; Izquierdo, Etherington, and Feliu 2017; Mervin and Mouline 2017). However, the groups analyzed could not be strictly classified as “Islamic”, as the cultural and religious element of the Islamic faith and worship were only partially present. Even the ulema, while more involved in managing the social and moral life of believers, did not focus solely on Islamic matters.

The term “Islam-oriented”, which suggests an orientation or inclination towards something, seemed to me the most appropriate categorization. Despite their different missions, all groups appeared to structure their collective actions around a broader framework—that of Islam. But which Islam are we referring to? When I asked this question, the interlocutors often responded with the “authentic Islam” (“*al-ṣaḥiḥ*”), or the “Islam of the right middle” (*al-waṣaṭiyya*) as frequently mentioned in conversations with Al-Amal volunteers, OREMA’s young activists, and members of the ulema council. In these discourses, Islam was represented not just as a set of beliefs and practices guiding Muslims, but as a comprehensive societal project that governs collective life and actions—an all-encompassing system. From this perspective, I chose to approach Islam as a normative system, downplaying considerations of personal faith in order to focus on analyzing the construction and implementation of this framework.

In this sense, I position my theoretical and epistemological approach to the study of the object “Islam” at the crossroads of post-colonial anthropological perspectives and critical sociological perspectives. On the one hand, it is essential to situate traditions, interpretations, and practices within local contexts and cultural dynamics, moving beyond essentialist and Orientalist simplifications (Asad 1986; 2003; 1973; El-Zein 1977; Rachik 2012). On the other hand, particularly in the Moroccan context, Islam must be approached as a symbolic system that engages with processes of political and social legitimation, with careful attention to the interplay between religion, power, and governance (Ferrié 2010; 2014; 2012).

As will be discussed in Part 2 of this thesis, the normative framework of “Moroccan Islam” emerged within the specific historical and political context of post-independence Morocco and played a pivotal role in consolidating the political and religious authority of the monarchy, contributing to the establishment of its politico-cultural hegemony. The monarchy brought together, in the figure of the sultan-turned-king, the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1982) of the threefold Islam: *‘ilm* (legal scholarship), *baraka* (spiritual power), and Sharifism (sacral nobility from prophetic descent)⁵³. Through this fusion, the monarchy secured a monopoly over any potential social, cultural, and political change in the country, as evidenced by events such as the Arab Spring⁵⁴. This context has often been described as “the Moroccan exception” due to the perceived uniqueness of the country’s socio-political and cultural structure⁵⁵. Islam-oriented social actors analyzed in this thesis do not oppose this normative framework. Instead, recognizing that any social, political, or moral change in Morocco must take place within the boundaries of this established framework, they adapt to it to legitimize their presence in the Moroccan public sphere, both online and offline.

III.II Where? When? How?

The fieldwork was conducted both offline and online. Offline, the three Islam-oriented groups are anchored to the territory in different ways. The Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq is affiliated with a national institution with a centralized structure and a broad network of influence. OREMA Tétouan, while having a national presence, maintains local specificities tied to the territory in which it operates. In contrast, the Al-Amal association is active exclusively within the province of Tétouan, where all its activities are concentrated. Online, all three groups are active on Facebook, with some expanding their presence to platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and blogs. Throughout the course of my research⁵⁶, Facebook was the primary platform for all three groups to convey their messages and activities. My approach combined an initial online ethnography, primarily focused on these groups’ Facebook pages, followed by offline ethnography in the province of Tétouan, particularly in the urban areas of Tétouan and the cities of Martil, M’diq, and Fnideq, once the pandemic-related travel restrictions eased.

⁵³ For an in-depth analysis of the religious and political authority of the king, see Part 2, chapter 5.

⁵⁴ For an analysis of the monarchy’s control over public communication spaces during the Arab Spring, see subchapter 6.2.

⁵⁵ The concept of the “Moroccan exception” is addressed at the outset of Part 2 and further analyzed in the Conclusions, III.

⁵⁶ Research ended in December 2022. For further details, see III.II.

Within the northern region of Tanger-Tétouan-Al Hoceima, the province of Tétouan is situated at the foot of Jbel Dersa in the Rif Mountains, on a plain that stretches to the Mediterranean Sea⁵⁷. The region's history is complex, with roots tracing back to the 3rd century BCE. The city experienced significant growth in the early 16th century, driven by the arrival of Andalusian Muslims and Sephardic Jews who fled Spain after the 1492 expulsion⁵⁸. During the colonial era, Tétouan became the capital of the Spanish protectorate in northern Morocco until the country gained independence in 1956⁵⁹. Tétouan is also the last major Moroccan city near the border with Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on the North African coast⁶⁰. Its historical and socio-cultural legacy highlights the complexity of its past and its unique role in Morocco's historical and geopolitical landscape. In this region, characterized by its Berber and Arab-Andalusian heritage and the enduring influence of its colonial past on the socio-political landscape, Islam-oriented groups are actively shaping religious and cultural dynamics, drawing from both historical legacies and contemporary realities.

Although these Islam-oriented groups are rooted in the geographical, historical, and socio-cultural context in which they operate, my research focused on observing how online and offline contexts intersect, mutually influencing activities, discourses, and everyday practices. This decision was primarily driven by the pandemic, which, on the one hand, shifted my research focus towards online spaces but also restructured the epistemological, ethical, and methodological foundations of my work, as discussed in part 1. Additionally, the lockdown reshaped the spaces, practices, and discourses of the social actors themselves, as discussed in Part 3 of this thesis. In this context, the “fieldwork site” extended beyond the physical perimeters of the region of Tétouan or specific Facebook pages, encompassing the hybrid social and spatial contexts that emerged from the continuous interactions of these actors, both online and offline. This shift informed the use of terms such as “contexts” or “environments” in relation to Islam-oriented dynamics (Smith and Kollock 2004; Faubion and Marcus 2009; Escobar et al. 1994). While concepts like “spaces” or “cultures” tend to emphasize the division between online and offline, “contexts” or “environments” more accurately reflect the fluid, evolving nature of these processes (Coleman and Collins 2006). These concepts better capture the complexity of historical, social, and cultural dynamics, as well as the fluidity of boundaries,

⁵⁷ The region of Tétouan has a population of around 600,000 (Haut-commissariat au Plan 2014).

⁵⁸ The influence of al-Andalus, the name of the Iberian Peninsula under Arab rule from 711 to 1492, is still visible today in Tétouan architecture and culture (Calderwood 2018).

⁵⁹ For an analysis of the impact on Spanish and French colonial policies in Morocco, see chapter 4 and 5.

⁶⁰ Its strategic location, just 40 kilometers from Ceuta, makes it a key point for both trade and cultural exchanges between Morocco and Europe. Additionally, it serves as a crucial transit hub for migration from the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East toward Europe.

which are not static like the walls of a room but are constantly shifting and being redefined (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Another key aspect of my fieldwork was the decision to focus exclusively on Facebook, despite Islam-oriented groups also being active on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Several factors influenced this choice. First, while not all three groups were present across all platforms, Facebook was the only one they all used. According to interviews, this was largely because Facebook had the largest audience for Islam-oriented groups. This is consistent with data from 2020, 2021, and 2022, which show that Facebook remained the most widely used social media platform in Morocco⁶¹. Additionally, interlocutors highlighted Facebook's versatility in supporting a mix of text, visuals, and audiovisual content, making it more effective for audience engagement compared to platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or WhatsApp, more limited in content formats. Finally, narrowing the scope to Facebook allowed me for a more precise and consistent comparative analysis of the collected data.

The research involved extensive fieldwork that combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. Although this thesis is primarily grounded in an anthropological perspective, the methodology extends beyond standard ethnographic practice. Instead, I developed a hybrid approach that combines online and offline fieldwork, qualitative and quantitative methods—all approached through an ethnographic lens—which I have termed NETHnography⁶². Drawing on theories of the social impact of digital media (Hine 2015; Beneito-Montagut 2011; Tüidenberg 2018), this method allowed me to investigate the interplay between people and their social and spatial contexts. NETHnography facilitated an exploration of the complex, non-linear dynamics between online and offline environments, where written, oral, audiovisual, and symbolic interaction intersect.

The findings presented in this thesis are based on research primarily conducted between 2020 and 2022, with additional data collected between 2016 and 2018. During the 2020-2022 period, I carried out 29 semi-structured interviews and collected 31 questionnaires from 32 participants, including members of Islam-oriented groups as well as individuals connected to these groups both online and offline⁶³. This research encompassed 23 months of fieldwork: 7

⁶¹ From 2019 to 2023, despite some variations, Facebook remained the second most widely used social media platform in Morocco, right after WhatsApp. See annual reports on DataReportal's website, <https://datareportal.com/digital-in-morocco>. For a chart on telecommunications and social media usage in Morocco, see Appendix 5.

⁶² For a detailed description of NETHnography, see subchapter 3.3.

⁶³ A blank questionnaire was sent. For an overview of the interlocutors, see Appendix 7; for a sample of the semi-structured questionnaires, see Appendix 8 and 9; for a sample of the structure questionnaire, see Appendix 10.

months offline⁶⁴ and 26 months online⁶⁵. It is important to note that my online ethnographic research began before the offline fieldwork, and I first encountered most of my key interlocutors, such as Meryam and Fatima, online. It was only in 2021-2022, toward the end of the research period, that I was able to travel to Tétouan. As it will be extensively discussed in Part 1, all participant names have been anonymized to protect their privacy, and the names appearing in the thesis are pseudonyms, except for one, which is explicitly noted in the text. The interviews were conducted in multiple languages, primarily French and English, but also in Spanish and Moroccan Arabic. The questionnaires were available in French, English, and Spanish, as my limited proficiency in Standard Arabic made processing large amounts of information in that language difficult⁶⁶.

The data collected from fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2018 includes online observations of OREMA and Al-Amal Facebook page, as well as qualitative and ethnographic research carried out mainly with the OREMA group in Meknes (northern-central Morocco). This enabled me to conduct a comprehensive comparison of the groups' interactions before and after the pandemic. While this thesis focuses on the contemporary period, I also conducted archival historical research, examining the French and Spanish Protectorate (1912-1956), with a particular focus on the 1920s and 1930s, and the post-colonial era during the 1960s-1980s, which marked the construction of the Moroccan nation-state. This archival research, which complements the ethnographic work, was carried out at the *Biblioteca Daoudia* in Tétouan for sources on Moroccan nationalism⁶⁷, as well as archives of the Mediterranean House of Human Sciences in Aix-en-Provence and of the French National Library in Paris for official reports and communications in the French protectorate.

⁶⁴ In September 2021 and from March to September 2022.

⁶⁵ From March 2020 to July 2020, from September 2020 to July 2021, from March 2022 to December 2022.

⁶⁶ Only the English versions of the questionnaires are included, see Appendix 8 and 9.

⁶⁷ Founded by northern Moroccan nationalist Mohammed Daoud and continued by his family, this public-access private library houses a collection of ancient manuscripts, religious, literary, and historical works, along with archives on Tétouan and northern Morocco, especially nationalist publications like magazine *Al-Salam*. For further details, see 4.3.2.

OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is divided into three parts, preceded by an introduction that places the research within the specific context of the MIDA project, the evolution of the study during COVID, and the development of fieldwork in hybrid contexts. Although chapters from I to III could have been integrated into the main body of the thesis, I chose to include them in the introduction to provide a comprehensive overview of the research's origins, topic, and developments. These chapters raise key issues that will be developed throughout the thesis: the epistemological, ethical, and methodological challenges related to my fieldwork, the central role of political and religious authority embodied by the Moroccan monarchy, and the creation of online and offline spaces and interactions that evolve in close connection with the normative and symbolic framework shaped by this authority. These elements form the core of the research, highlighting the dynamic interaction between construction (and contestation) of authority and new media in contemporary Moroccan society.

Part 1 of the thesis lays out the epistemological, ethical, and methodological foundations of the research. Drawing on my personal experience during the pandemic, I reflect on how my research evolved through three key concepts: precarity (related to the context in which the research was conducted), vulnerability (affecting both the researcher and the interlocutors), and sensitivity (connected to the nature of the research topic and the data collected). In chapter 1, I explore the epistemological basis of my research, rooted in the idea that “precariousness” is an intrinsic human condition that enables connection with others and the recognition of their vulnerability. Building on this epistemological framework, chapter 2 integrates the shared experience of vulnerability as an ethical foundation for the research. The experiences of discomfort, shared by both me and my interlocutors, are discussed to show how this common experience of vulnerability has shaped and deepened the anthropological reflexivity that underpins the study.

In chapter 3, I outline how the study of Islam-oriented groups, active in both offline and online contexts, required the development of a flexible and adaptive methodology. In this section, I address the ethical issues related to Internet-based data collection, with a particular focus on “sensitivity” concerns such as data management, informed consent, and digital

privacy. After critically evaluating the limitations of standardized ethical protocols, I propose a more contextualized and flexible approach, tailored to the specific ethical challenges of my research on a case-by-case basis. I also reflect on the hybrid nature of my fieldwork and the ethnographic approaches it demanded. The different meanings and forms of “accessing” the field and “interacting” with interlocutors underscored the need for a flexible and adaptable methodology, that I named “NEThnography”. This methodology integrated multimodal and multidisciplinary approaches by combining classical ethnographic methods with analytical tools from the Digital Humanities.

The second part of this thesis presents a historical and sociological analysis of the construction of power in Morocco, focusing on three central dimensions: language policies, the formation of a collective national identity, and the development of the public sphere. The primary aim is to examine how these elements, which emerged during the Protectorate period and were further consolidated in the post-independence era, have served as fundamental pillars in shaping the religious and political authority of the Moroccan monarchy. Within this framework, Islamic-oriented groups have aligned themselves and drawn upon these reference points to advance their own agendas. In chapter 4, I examine the history of Morocco’s languages and language policies and ideologies, tracing how they have shaped governance models from the period of French and Spanish Protectorates through to the 2010 Constitution. These governance models were strategically leveraged to advance distinct socio-political projects (i.e., colonization, nation-building, and the “modernization” of the monarchy). In doing so, they played a pivotal role in supporting the various power structures that emerged within the country.

Chapter 5 explores the construction of national identity during and after independence. I argue that Morocco’s “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) was shaped around the motto “One God, one nation, one king” (“*Allah, al-waṭan, al-malik*”). I demonstrate how the monarchy successfully built national identity around nationalist principles of unification, partly inspired by colonial discourse, and harmonized these with the king’s role as Commander of the Faithful. This allowed the monarchy to connect the figure of the sultan-turned-king to a supposedly unified precolonial past. This reference served two main purposes: to create ideological continuity that reinforced a unified national identity, and to legitimize the authority of the king by emphasizing his dual role as a religious and political leader. Hence, Islam in Morocco was framed not only as a religious system but also as a socio-political and cultural one. I argue that the concept of “Moroccan Islam” as a “virtuous” exception in the region is a tool through which the monarchy perpetuates and consolidates its legitimacy.

Chapter 6 examines the public sphere of communication as a privileged context in which narratives on power have been shaped and disseminated. Central to this analysis is the concept of “spaces of mediation”, which I define as physical and virtual environments where processes of mediation between individuals, society, and institutions take place. These spaces have played a crucial role in legitimizing the socio-political project of Moroccan Islam, particularly during the reign of Mohammed VI. They have facilitated the construction of a unified narrative of power that acknowledges Morocco’s cultural diversity while reinforcing centralized control. By exploring media governance in Morocco from the late 1990s to the 2020s, I highlight how the country has experienced a greater plurality of opinions, thanks to the spread of the Internet and digital media. However, despite this apparent openness, state surveillance, cooptation, and repression remain pervasive. Finally, drawing on field research, the chapter examines how Islam-oriented groups have navigated and utilized these spaces of mediation. These groups have adapted their communication strategies to the digital age, using new media much like they previously used public spaces, not only to disseminate their messages but also to seek legitimacy within the institutional framework of “Moroccan Islam”.

While Part 2 of the thesis aims to explore the construction of power in Morocco from a diachronic perspective, Part 3 seeks, through a synchronic analysis characteristic of ethnographic research, to investigate how this power is embedded in specific Islam-oriented contexts—and how these contexts contribute to its reinterpretation and consolidation. Part 3 of the thesis delves into these dynamics, exploring how social actors within Islam-oriented groups navigate hybrid contexts, both online and offline, to gain legitimacy and visibility by presenting a discourse aligned with the established socio-political order. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected during field research within the Al-Amal NGO, the OREMA student union, and the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq, I demonstrate that in Morocco, power is not constructed primarily through a dialectic of contention, but rather through processes of assimilation and exclusion. At the same time, the hybrid contexts where these Islam-oriented groups operate are not neutral frameworks, but dynamic environments that shape the social actors within them. In turn, through their actions and interactions, these actors reshape these environments, creating a reciprocal process. This reciprocal process underscores how narratives of power are not merely imposed from above, but also emerge from the interaction and reappropriation of spaces, practices, and discourses of the social actors themselves.

To explore this process, chapter 7 focuses on what I call the “hybridization of space”, both social and physical, in which the actors navigate. The COVID pandemic has reshaped

the already fluid boundaries between online and offline environments. With limited access to offline daily life, many Islam-oriented actors have increasingly integrated the online sphere into their everyday activities. This shift is evident in the creation of new Facebook pages, the enhanced “curation” of these platforms, and the growth in subscribers and posts. The hybridization of spaces is reflected in what I define as “crossing practices” between online and offline realms, which demonstrate mobility and adaptability in the actors’ practices. Chapter 8 builds on this analysis by examining how these “crossing practices” lead to processes of resemiotization, where signs and meanings are reshaped and transformed across different semiotic systems. Field observations revealed that shifting from written or spoken expressions to visual or symbolic forms impacts actors’ behaviors and interactions. In chapter 9, I bring together the analysis of space hybridization and the resemiotization of interactions to explore how these processes affect actors’ self-perception as social subjects, particularly in relation to factors like gender, status, origin, and age. Indeed, this reconfiguration of subjectivities is shaped not only by the contexts and interactions the actors engage in, but also by their individual trajectories and the collective dynamics within each group. Through life stories, observations, and interviews, I demonstrate how individuals connected to Islam-oriented groups construct their subjectivity in these hybrid contexts, crafting a narrative of the “Islam of the right middle” that aligns with their specific engagement with the Moroccan socio-political framework.

At the end of this study, by examining the developments that have influenced Islam-oriented groups after the conclusion of fieldwork, I revisit the construction of power in Morocco and how it is mediated within hybrid Islam-oriented contexts.

PART 1

BEHIND THE FIELD

“PRECARIOUS CONTEXT”, “VULNERABLE SUBJECTS”,
“SENSITIVE TOPIC”



Cov. 2 Screenshot from the video “Anthropology in Slippers: Doing Fieldwork in Morocco... from a Computer” by Eleonora Landucci for the European Researchers’ Night in Spain (Online, November 27, 2020)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGjWokwghQ&t=10s&ab_channel=EleonoraLanducci

*Constater que le chercheur est un des acteurs du jeu social
dont il s'est donné la tâche de rendre compte [...],
permet de traiter l'enquête elle-même comme un terrain d'investigation.*
(Althabe 1990)

This research journey was shaped by three key circumstances that fundamentally influenced its epistemological, ethical, and methodological foundations. Firstly, the study began and evolved during the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus. From the hinterland of Western China, COVID spread all around the world, triggering a crisis often described as the most severe disruption since the Great Depression⁶⁸ or World War II⁶⁹. Although this view reflects a Western-centric perspective⁷⁰, the pandemic caused an unprecedented triple crisis—health, economic, and socio-political—that impacted all aspects of human life, including my professional and my personal life. As a young PhD candidate entering the academic job market, the pandemic intensified existing precarity, highlighting and worsening the frictions, disparities, and inequalities already present in academic research and higher education.

The second circumstance involves vulnerability. COVID not only instilled a sudden sense of vulnerability in my professional and personal life but also exacerbated existing feelings of discomfort and distress as I embarked on my fieldwork. In the early months of 2020, I was about to begin ethnographic research with what I referred to as Islam-oriented groups⁷¹. For these individuals—active members or sympathizers of NGO's, student unions, and religious

⁶⁸ Gita Gopinath, “The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression” International Monetary Fund (IMF) Blog, April 14, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2020/04/14/blog-weo-the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression#.Y5Cm6d8hm68.link>.

⁶⁹ António Guterres, “This is a time for science and solidarity”, United Nations webpage, April 14, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/time-science-and-solidarity>.

⁷⁰ For instance, in the 1950s, around 300 million people worldwide were affected by malaria, which caused 3 million deaths a year (Zimmer 2014).

⁷¹ For a description of the groups involved in the research, as well as the use of the term “Islam-oriented”, see Introduction, III.

institutions advocating for the implementation of Islamic values across all societal spheres—interacting with a white, European, non-Muslim woman often fraught with conflict. Similarly, the disparity between my personal ethics, convictions, and worldview and those of my interlocutors raised important questions about empathy, care, and commitment in the field.

Finally, the third circumstance relates to the hybrid nature of my fieldwork, which spanned both online and offline environments. On one hand, the digital aspect of my research, coupled with my research topic, raised questions about the sensitivity of the findings, as well as the vulnerability of the individuals and groups involved. Consequently, conducting qualitative research online necessitated deconstructing standardized ethical guidelines in favor of more tailored, case-by-case ethics. On the other hand, facing the challenge of investigating an online environment extensively for the first time required a comprehensive readjustment of my ethnographic methods to develop a more multimodal and expanded methodological toolbox (Goulden et al. 2017).

These three interrelated circumstances elicited a series of complex emotions, experienced by both my interlocutors and me, that significantly influenced the research journey. I categorized these feelings under three conditions: precarity, vulnerability, and sensitivity. Precarious were work and life commitments during COVID; vulnerable was my positioning in the field as well as the relationships with my interlocutors; and sensitive was often defined by my research topic and its content as perceived by both interlocutors and colleagues. Drawing on the lived experience of these conditions, I reflected on the epistemological, ethical, and methodological foundations of my research. In this part, I address several key questions: How were concepts of vulnerability and precarity mobilized during the pandemic, and how can these assumptions be critically reformulated? What are the implications when vulnerability and precarity are used as analytical categories in research ethics and methods? How can a reflexive posture be developed starting from the researcher's own life and work experiences, beyond mere fieldwork, to produce anthropological knowledge? How is this reflexive posture maintained as a means for the objectivation of the social world, rather than as purely introspective self-exploration? What defines a “sensitive topic”, and how can it be investigated within the hybrid context of online and offline interactions? What are the possibilities, challenges, and limits of conducting ethnography both online and offline?

I have tried to answer these questions by employing research methods that allow me to scrutinize the research object and my personal experiences in examining it. Consequently, I developed two methodological axes: the first one involves tools for research ethics and reflexivity, which I have named “assemblage reflexivity”. This methodology encompasses all

tools, methods, and techniques aimed at, on one hand, objectifying my positioning both within and outside the field, and on the other hand, facilitating auto-ethnography and self-study. The theoretical foundation for assemblage reflexivity draws from two distinct, if not divergent, fields: the qualitative sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2003) and the interpretative anthropology of George Marcus and James Clifford (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The rationale and techniques for this theoretical and methodological assemblage will be elaborated in subchapter 2.3.

The second research axis revolves around “NEThnography”, the methodological toolset elaborated for this research. The “net” in NEThnography signifies “network” and has multiple connotations: on one hand, it refers to the theoretical framework guiding the methodology; on the other hand, it represents a reticle of diverse methods, each subjected to an ethnographic examination. To develop this, I drew primarily from the field of online ethnography, which includes using ethnographic techniques in online settings, applying digital research methods to ethnographic studies, and observing the Internet as an anthropological object. The theories and methods underpinning NEThnography will be detailed in chapter 3.

The reflections raised in this part seek to clarify from which perspectives, under which considerations, and with which approaches specific anthropological knowledge was produced. This clarification is essential to delving deeper into the core of the research. By discussing research epistemology, ethics, and methodology, this part aims to address several assumptions: anthropology’s tendency to focus on subjects that evoke empathy, sympathy, and solidarity; the distinction between “the field” and “home” and the stereotype of the ever-available, versatile ethnographer in a remote, temporally distant field; the concerns over “conventional” versus “innovative” methods in anthropology regarding their scientific validity. The aim here is to discuss these assumptions through my personal experiences as an ethnographer, a young researcher, a foreigner, a precarious worker, a white woman. Acknowledging how the complexities and interconnections of my life in relation to my research have shaped knowledge production can offer new insights for rethinking ethnography and, more broadly, social science research in an increasingly precarious world.

The first part of this manuscript is structured as follows: in chapter 1, I use my personal experience during COVID to discuss selected literature on precarity, resilience, and vulnerability as analytical tools to interpret the social context of my research. To understand the criteria under which a subject can be considered “vulnerable”, I delve deeper into the concept of vulnerability, which both my interlocutors in the field and I employ to define our conditions, although coming from varied positionings. Chapter 2 continues this examination

with a discussion of my research ethics and reflexivity. Drawing on ethnographic examples that highlight feelings of discomfort, I elaborate on the set of methods of assemblage reflexivity. These methods are designed to analyze and objectify my positioning, not only within the field and in relation to my interlocutors but also in the context of my life and work commitments. Finally, I discuss the ethical issues and methodological challenges of conducting ethnography in both online and offline settings. Here, I explain what NEThnography is and discuss its importance in today's qualitative research for expanding our methodological toolboxes.

“TUTTO ANDRÀ BENE”?

PRECARITY AND VULNERABILITY IN RESILIENT TIMES



Fig. 1 The slogan “Tutto andrà bene” handwritten on a sheet tied to a balcony in an unspecified place of Italy, around March 2020. Photo by Fotogramma. © Fotogramma.

“Late February 2020, Barcelona. Over the past few days, I have been incessantly listening to the radio, reading newspapers, browsing social networks, and watching TV to understand what is happening in Italy, my country of birth. A contagious disease originating from China has been detected in Codogno, a small town in Northern Italy, and it appears to be spreading throughout the country. The term “outbreak” only reminds me of distant events: the mad cow disease in 2001, the swine flu in 2009, the Ebola epidemic in 2014... This time, however, the crisis is much closer, just a few hundred kilometers from where my family lives. Currently, I am not with them; I reside in Spain, working on a PhD project, and I am scheduled to leave soon for Catania, in Southern Italy. This trip is significant: together with my colleagues from the MIDA research project, we are organizing our first Spring School at the University of Catania. We plan to present the initial stages of our research, conduct training sessions, and strengthen our network. With only a few days left before departure, my colleagues and I are still uncertain whether we can travel. They have asked me to translate numerous articles, posts, and tweets from

Italy concerning the health situation there. That is why I am constantly tuned into the news and glued to my phone”.

Shortly after I recorded this memory in my field journal in February 2020, we received the news: the spring school was canceled due to the University of Catania’s closure in response to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus⁷². Shortly thereafter, we learned that our own universities and institutions would either shut down or remain open only for essential personnel until further notice. This was the onset of what would come to be known worldwide as “the COVID pandemic”. Throughout Europe and many parts of the world, access to indoor public spaces was strictly regulated, and most work, educational, and recreational activities, both indoor and outdoor, were significantly curtailed. People across the globe experienced varying lengths of lockdown, and borders between many countries were sealed indefinitely. Consequently, I had to cancel my ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Morocco, as the borders between the country and Spain were closed. Originally, I was scheduled to depart in April 2020 for a year-long stay in Morocco, but I was unable to enter the country until September 2021.

Experiencing such a sudden, shocking event unleashed intense and conflicting emotions in me. During the initial lockdown –a term that quickly became part of our everyday vocabulary—the relentless stream of pandemic-related news from the media began to take a toll on my mental health severely affecting my mental health, and I decided to minimize the mediatic consumption to the bare minimum. However, the Internet found clever ways to reach me, like through a simple photo texted by my mother. It was of a poster on a balcony in Italy, displaying the hopeful slogan “*tutto andrà bene*” (“everything will be all right”, fig. 1). This slogan, first seen on posters and bedsheets, often colorfully handwritten, and accompanied by a rainbow and the hashtag “*#IoRestoACasa*”, quickly went viral⁷³. This “message of hope”⁷⁴ was

⁷² The spring school transitioned to a summer school and was rescheduled online for June 2020. For a presentation of the summer school, see the webpage of the call for applications, last access, March 21, 2022, <https://iismm.ehess.fr/formations-doctorales/2020-contesting-authority-knowledge-power-and-expressions-selfhood>.

⁷³ Meaning “I stay at home”, the hashtag was created by the Italian government to encourage the population to respect the rules of the lockdown to limit contagion, <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/notizie/Pagine/Coronavirus-il-Decreto-IoRestoacasa-e-in-Gazzetta-Ufficiale.aspx>.

⁷⁴ For further details on the spread of the hashtag, see Jedidajah Otte, “Everything Will be All Right: Message of Hope Spreads in Italy”, *The Guardian*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/12/everything-will-be-alright-italians-share-slogan-of-hope-in-face-of-coronavirus-crisis>.

featured extensively in media reports⁷⁵, repeatedly mentioned in news and on radio, and has inspired books, podcasts⁷⁶, and songs⁷⁷.

In the public debate, the slogan *tutto andrà bene* was often cited as an emblem of the Italian positive and resilient attitude toward the pandemic. Reflecting on this slogan in my journal from early 2020, I was struck by its grammar: the use of an unspecified future tense, an undefined subject “everything”, and the vague direct object “fine”. This optimistic projection into an undefined future seemed to relieve everyone from the responsibility of addressing the present. This detachment was further amplified by the phrase’s impersonal subject, which fails to specify or implicate anyone. Moreover, the word “fine”, which so inspired public opinion to view Italy as a beacon of resilience, left little room for acknowledging the prevalent feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, fear, and stress—summarized succinctly as precarity.

The optimistic slogan was masking a sudden and global exacerbation of an already widespread precarious condition among various segments of the global population. Instead of acknowledging and addressing suffering, the message subtly promoted a resilient attitude focused on enduring hardships with minimal emotional response⁷⁸. As a PhD researcher in anthropology pursuing a professional career in academia, I am familiar with such messages. My professional growth was marked by experiencing precarity, characterized by budget cuts for public research, dwindling funds and grants, and increased competition for teaching and research positions. I was also taught to be resilient, as precarity in the academic world of humanities and social sciences is so prevalent that resilience has become almost a prerequisite for university students aspiring to an academic career.

The sudden intensification of emotions—uncertainty, insecurity, fear, and stress—previously experienced more mildly and sporadically, along with their spread across various segments of the global population, prompted me to examine precarity as the epistemological foundation of my research. The precarious conditions during COVID affected my research access and the relationships with my interlocutors, as the environment in which I would produce anthropological knowledge was deeply infused with precarity, or as I argue in subchapter 1.1, precariousness. Additionally, both my interlocutors and I experienced conditions of vulnerability during fieldwork, although from different perspectives and at

⁷⁵ A rapid search of articles only in Italian containing the words “andrà tutto bene” or “tutto andrà bene” between 2020 and 2022 have given more than 8 million results on Google Chrome.

⁷⁶ Various Authors, “Andrà Tutto Bene, Un Podcast di Radio Popolare”, *Radio Popolare*, February-March 2021, <https://www.radiopopolare.it/trasmissione/andra-tutto-bene/>.

⁷⁷ Elisa and Tommaso Paradiso “Andrà Tutto Bene”, April 10, 2020, *Universal Music Italia*, digital downloading, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBWTU_hQLDM&ab_channel=ElisaVEVO.

⁷⁸ For a reflection on the concept of resilience, see 1.2.

juxtaposing levels. Conditions of precarity and vulnerability influenced both my ethical stance and my methodological choices, making it crucial to explore some of their most significant theoretical conceptualizations.

1.1 Precarity, the Precariat, and Precariousness

The notion of precarity emerged as a central concern in scholarly research in the humanities and social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century, partly in response to political mobilizations against neoliberal globalization, social exclusion, and ecological crises (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004). A review of recent anthropological and philosophical literature on the concept suggests two main areas of inquiry: the first, derived from Marxist theory, identifies precarity as closely linked to transformations of labor and global capital accumulation under the neoliberal capitalist phase. The second current of thought, influenced by ontological perspectives, distinguishes between precariousness and the interdependence of living forms and the development of precarity phenomena under conditions of violence, social isolation, and economic uncertainty. What distinguishes these two approaches is that, in the first case, labor is central to the theoretical conceptualization of precarity, whereas the second area of inquiry understands precariousness as a generalized condition of human life.

As a condition arising from post-Fordist neoliberal capitalism, precarity highlights that temporary and informal work is now the primary means of livelihood in the early twenty-first century. With the advent of state-implemented austerity and increasingly unstable labor conditions, many in the middle class now face challenges previously confined to “the poor”, such as casual labor, financial struggles at the month’s end, and living on the urban fringe (Bourdieu 1998). Sociologist Guy Standing has identified the “global precariat” as a new class characterized by unique structural relationships to capital and distinct self-interests, contrasting sharply with the older generation of stable, long-term, unionized workers (Standing 2011). This new working class is trapped in sporadic, casual labor, lacking stable employment and consistent income (Han 2018).

The autonomist Marxist school views precarity not just as a descriptor of unstable labor conditions but also of unachievable normative expectations due to constant economic insecurity. As the job market that supported a middle-class lifestyle became increasingly scarce, workers faced not only economic instability but also the inability to secure socially recognized employment (Berardi 2009). This relentless pursuit of a norm, achievable only by a few at the expense of many, drives precarization. Thus, precarity transcends mere social behavior in the

neoliberal job market, becoming a transformative element of social life. This analysis is partly influenced by Foucault's biopolitical perspective, which suggests that the history of power involves the living body being shaped by deeply transformative institutions and practices that impose behaviors, expectations, and permanent modifications (Foucault 2004a).

Philosopher Judith Butler, whose writings are a cornerstone in the study of precarity, draws on Foucauldian theory to examine power and subjectivity in today's world. Butler differentiates between "precarity" and "precariousness": she views life as inherently precarious and defines precariousness as a universal human vulnerability stemming from our essential interdependence. According to Butler, our survival depends on the bodily and emotional labor of both humans and non-humans, making all humans inherently vulnerable (Butler 2004). She describes this vulnerability as "being given over to the touch of the other", symbolizing a fundamental existential helplessness (Ibid. 2004a, 32). Precarity, however, specifically refers to how socio-economic and political structures unevenly distribute this vulnerability, thus privileging some lives and bodies as protected and valuable, while others are marginalized and disregarded (Butler 2012; Castel 1994). In Butler's analysis, when systems of care and social recognition are disrupted by neoliberal capitalism, those affected by economic instability, violence, and social isolation experience precarity (Butler 2004).

Reflecting on the precariousness of life, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing studies the livelihoods and environments tied to Matsutake mushrooms, framing them within "the possibility of life in capitalist ruins" (Tsing 2015). Tsing uses these mushrooms⁷⁹ as a lens to explore what she describes as "life without stability" (Ibid. 2015, 19), asserting that precarity is not an anomaly but rather "the condition of our time" (Ibid. 2015, 20). She views it as a recognition of our inherent vulnerability and interdependence, noting, "In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent" (Ibid. 2015, 45). By reimagining precarity not just as instability but as a pathway to freedom and placemaking, Tsing suggests we can inhabit this earth not despite but because of capitalist destruction.

By exploring precariousness as a crucial element of transformation for oneself and others, the theses of both Butler and Tsing propose an alternative ethical framework for human life, serving as a potent tool for resistance and subversion. Applying this framework to the pandemic context, in a world devoid of stable community structures where survival is uncertain, recognizing precariousness as a condition of vulnerability to others can re-enable

⁷⁹ The Matsutake mushroom exclusively grows in human-disturbed landscapes. Inspired by this, Tsing investigates the global Matsutake trade through collaborative ethnography in Japan, China, the USA, and Finland, exploring the intertwined climate and economic crises.

life. The epistemological foundations of my research are rooted in this precarious state; this specific anthropological knowledge arises from recognizing that life is vulnerable, interconnected, and interdependent, always susceptible to the influence of others. Thus, vulnerability offers a valuable ethical and methodological approach, provided that (mis)interpretations of the term are addressed.

1.2 Vulnerability vs. Resilience

During COVID, the terms “vulnerability” and “resilience” often appeared together. The popularity of “resilience” stems from its definition: the ability of individuals and entities to quickly recover from adverse events⁸⁰. This concept had gained prominence even before the pandemic, particularly rising in the 1980s, a decade widely regarded as the beginning of neoliberal hegemony (Scott 2018). Consequently, and not surprisingly, resilience features prominently in diverse national and international programs, actions, and initiatives. For instance, a simple keyword search for “resilience” on the websites of organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and the European Commission yields an average of 100,000 results⁸¹. In these programs, resilience is conceptualized as a remedy for vulnerability, which is defined as being weak and susceptible to attack, injury, or damage⁸².

The concept of resilience is particularly powerful because it is applicable both at the macro level of national and international entities and at the micro level of individual lives. Resilience can be synonymous with adaptability, whether in building financial systems for national economies⁸³, or in coping with the structural failures of public hospitals that cannot accommodate all COVID patients needing intensive care. During the pandemic, as a significant portion of the global population suddenly found themselves vulnerable, “being resilient” emerged as a crucial skill and a commendable quality. The rhetoric surrounding

⁸⁰ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1998), s.v. “resilience”.

⁸¹ See the official websites of the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, the European Commission, last access, March 30, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/site-search?query=resilience>; <https://www.worldbank.org/en/search?q=resilience>; <https://www.imf.org/en/Search#q=resilience&sort=relevancy>; https://commission.europa.eu/index_en?wt-search=yes.

⁸² This interpretation stems from the Latin verb *vulnerare*, “to wound”. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1998), s.v. “vulnerable”.

⁸³ For more details, see the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), the Italian plan of financial and social investments in response to the pandemic crisis and approved by the European Union in 2021, last access, March 30, 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/approfondimento/nrrp-objectives-and-structure/18999>.

resilient individuals, who consistently bend without breaking, mirrors the prevailing neoliberal discourse across many Western nations. Within this framework, resilience serves to estrange citizens from their social and human rights, which are increasingly regarded as privileges or even outright denied.

Butler's theory on precarity and precariousness challenges the simplistic equating of vulnerability with weakness and criticizes the rise of resilient subjects who tame their vulnerability (Butler et al. 2016; Butler 2004). Embracing our vulnerability allows us to acknowledge the vulnerability of others, facilitating ethical encounters, and even resistance to structural oppression and domination. This perspective is echoed by numerous feminist scholars, who have shifted the concept from a connotation of inherent feminine weakness to advocating for vulnerability as a foundation for new ethical and political behaviors in today's world (Bracke 2016; Fuster et al. 2021; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013). These approaches promote collaborative and relational subjectivities to counter the competitive and individualistic pressures imposed on individuals. In this context, vulnerability contrasts with resilience, which focuses on overcoming the inherent vulnerable aspects of oneself.

Taking this approach into account, in the subsequent subchapter, I investigate the definition of a vulnerable subject through my research trajectory, which spans from establishing universal ethical standards on research integrity regarding vulnerable subjects to direct experiences in the field.

1.3 Who is “the Vulnerable Subject”?

Further deepening the reflection on vulnerability, we might ask, who is vulnerable? This question does not have a simple answer. Over the past two decades, “vulnerable” has referred both to a condition and to a categorization, posing several epistemological challenges. Because of its popularity and widespread use in various spheres—politics, media, health, and social—the concept has become polysemic. “The vulnerable” is employed as a category for scientific analysis and as a framework for public action⁸⁴. The popularity of this term, perhaps due to its less emotionally charged nature compared to others, has achieved widespread success across

⁸⁴ Used in environmental science, risk management, and medical fields, the concept of vulnerability encompasses exposure, threat, and risk, serving as a tool to identify “vulnerable populations” (Thomas 2008). In social sciences, it aligns with the notion of the “precariat” to explore new social and economic inequalities emerging under neoliberalism and to advocate for their mitigation. The category of “being vulnerable” has gained prominence in social policies and the humanitarian field, aiming to humanize repressive measures on asylum and migration rights (Sözer 2020; Brodiez-Dolino 2015), or to create policies that categorize the vulnerable as passive individuals (Bonjour and Chauvin 2018; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015).

various contexts, both theoretical and practical. Recent literature on vulnerability and migration highlights a growing trend towards the standardization of the “vulnerable” category, in both legislative and operational spheres, often driven by strategic political motivations (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015).

This need for standardization is evident in research ethics. Incorporating vulnerability into research methodologies has long been addressed through procedural guidelines and established codes of conduct. When I signed the PhD contract for the European Commission-funded project⁸⁵, I consequently agreed to adhere to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity⁸⁶. This code, like other established guidelines, aims to provide universal, context-independent ethical norms to ensure researcher integrity, suggesting that ethical behavior can be regulated, and risks predicted. Aside from not mentioning once the world precarity and/or vulnerability, the European Code results insufficient, especially for social researchers, whose use of ethnography and qualitative methods is incompatible with standardization of consent and confidentiality.

The causes and circumstances of vulnerability arise from multiple overlapping effects and are always contextual to specific people, discourses, and spaces. In this sense, the anthropological approach proves to be more accurate than procedural guidelines. By observing social reality through a dynamic exchange between the specific and the universal, anthropology accounts for both the “emic” and the “etic” perspectives (Ciavolella and Wittersheim 2016). The “emic” perspective reflects the viewpoints, values, and beliefs of social actors, while the “etic” perspective represents the anthropologist’s interpretation of these phenomena (Headland et al. 1990). With regards to vulnerability, anthropology considers the boundaries established by different social actors in their (self)identifications rather than imposing specific external limits .

Despite being active in different contexts of Moroccan society, all the individuals associated with Islam-oriented groups that I encountered during my fieldwork tend to identify themselves as vulnerable. Often, in my conversations with Tariq, the president of the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq, describes himself as “being exposed” (*mefḍōh* in MA, lit. “to be exposed in plain sight of everyone”) when interact online; when asked about their situation, many activists from the student union OREMA use the word “surveilled” (*maḥḍi* in MA) to describe their condition as unionists. Meryam, the secretary and social media manager of the

⁸⁵ For a description of the structure of the MIDA project, see Introduction, I.

⁸⁶ European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, last access, March 30, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/european-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity_horizon_en.pdf.

NGO Al-Amal, tells me how members of the organization, “despite doing good (*el-xayr* in MA) in the name of Islam” they “feel at risk (*xāṭār* in MA)”. By exploring with them the causes of these feelings, various reasons for feeling vulnerable come to light. Tariq attributes his sense of exposure to both positive factors (“being known by people allows me to set a good example”) and negative factors (“I often receive hate messages on the Internet from those who call themselves brothers but are actually against Islam”⁸⁷). Hassan, an OREMA activist and a third-year chemistry student at the Faculty of Sciences in Tétouan, feels monitored by “traitors of the nation and the *umma*”⁸⁸. Meryam speaks about the risk faced by the NGO’s volunteers who support women victims of violence: “the violent person is often the husband, who does not hesitate to be violent outside the family as well”.

At the same time, during the initial stages of my online and offline ethnography, I often felt vulnerable. When explaining my research question to my interlocutors⁸⁹, I was frequently advised to “be careful who you talk to” or “not to ask too many questions”. While chatting via Facebook or WhatsApp, they often preferred to interrupt the conversation and switch to a face-to-face meeting if possible. Additionally, since my fieldwork was both offline and online, I was concerned about not exposing my interlocutors to further vulnerability, given the blurred boundaries between what is “private” and “public”, and what is “accessible” and “confidential”⁹⁰. Feelings of vulnerability emerged also when explaining my research topic to family, friends, and colleagues. The concern would be manifested mainly by facial expressions—raising eyebrows, grinding teeth—or by small sound expressions and phrases like “it must not be easy”.

⁸⁷ Tariq refers to negative comments or insults that he occasionally receives on his personal Facebook profile.

⁸⁸ Hassan refers to other militants from opposing union factions, such as Al-Adl activists. For further details about Morocco’s student unionism, see Introduction, III.

⁸⁹ After introducing myself, I express my interest in Islam not only as a religion but also as a societal project in Morocco. I further explain that I am seeking groups or individuals who promote this project, both offline and online on social media. For a detailed explanation of the evolution of my research problem, see Introduction, II.

⁹⁰ For a discussion of the ethical and reflexive positioning underpinning my research, see Part 1, chapter 2.

Multiple and intertwined levels of vulnerability were presented to me: one related to the self-identification of my interlocutors as vulnerable subjects; another related to the attribution of vulnerability to myself by my interlocutors and my personal and professional network; and a third related to the methodological and ethical uncertainties caused by conducting online research. All of this occurred in an extremely vulnerable historical moment characterized by the political, socio-cultural, and health crisis of COVID. Hence, this tripartite condition of vulnerability that has permeated my research guided a reflection and a subsequent elaboration of ethics and methods. In the next chapter I will delve into research ethics and methods, starting from describing how the embodied and relational experience of vulnerability prompted me to develop specific ethical positionings and methodological choices.

RESEARCH IN ETHICS. RESEARCH IN REFLEXIVITY

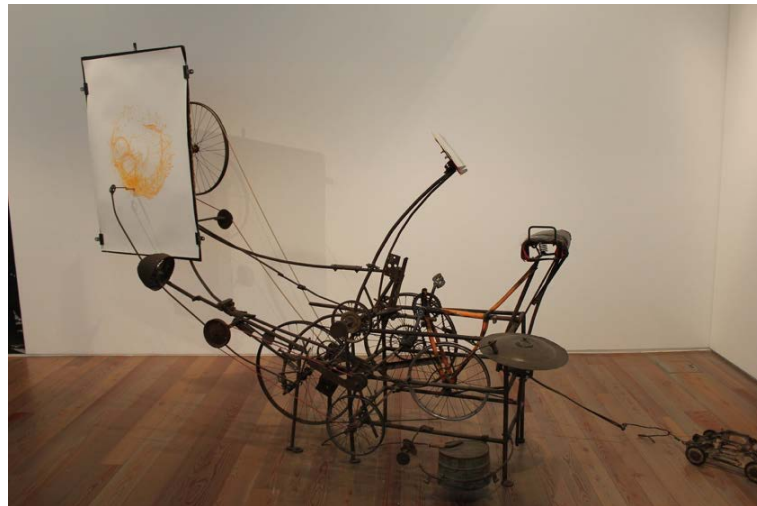


Fig. 2 The assemblage sculpture “Cyclograveur” (1961) realized by artist Jean Tinguely (Welded scrap metal, bicycle elements, sheet metal, drum and cymbal, book. 225 x 410 x 110 cm. Kunsthaus, Zürich), photo by Tim Sheerman-Chase, 2013. © BY-NC-ND 2.0.

As I mentioned previously, recognizing the limitations of universalized approaches to research ethics on vulnerability necessitated a recalibration of my approach to research ethics. To develop an ethical framework that considers the embodied experiences of both my interlocutors and me, alternative approaches to standardized research ethics can be found in feminist, situational, and relational methods (Hesse-Biber 2012). These perspectives share a focus on ethical practices based on everyday decision-making, on relations and their emotional and embodied dimensions. Since no ethical issue is context-free, the core of these methods involves concentrating on the concrete moments during research, making case-by-case decisions based on the anthropological relationship between the ethnographer and the interlocutors (Mattingly 2005). Relational ethics go beyond merely avoiding harm; they aspire to build confidence and trust. Therefore, research ethics are not limited to a signed or recorded “informed consent” but are a continuous process that begins before, extends during, and lasts

after the fieldwork. The following subchapter presents two examples of case-by-case decision-making concerning confidentiality.

2.1 *Ethics of Care... and Discomfort*

“I first contacted Meryam online in the spring of 2020, and finally met her in person in March 2022 at the NGO’s headquarters near the city center of Tétouan. From our initial online exchanges, Meryam is aware of my interest in Al-Amal for research purposes since our first exchanges. Early on, I ask her if she wants to remain anonymous and, if so, how she prefers to do so. Does she want to change her name? How would she like to be involved in this research? How often? Another important aspect is not only seeking consent (“Do you agree if..”) but also understanding her feelings about the consequences of giving consent (“How do you feel if..”). These questions are part of a continuous process of negotiation and discussion throughout our ethnographic relationship, not just at the beginning or end. Because of this approach, Meryam can give or withdraw her consent at any stage of our relationship, which she does. As we get to know each other, Meryam becomes confident that I will not expose her in dangerous or inconsiderate ways. Initially, she chooses to remain anonymous, but over time, she explicitly asks for a different kind of protection. She doesn’t want to be seen and treated as just another anonymous interlocutor. She wants her “voice to be heard” and asks to have her “real identity” exposed”.

“Meryam often tells me that I am welcome in the NGO, but as a non-Muslim, I cannot participate in certain activities, such as the female reading and learning sessions of the Quran. I always respect this choice, limiting myself to explaining to Meryam my interest in attending these sessions. One day, she sends me a recording via WhatsApp, telling me she has recorded a reading session for me, accompanied by a smiley emoji. She mentions that nobody knows she was recording and asks me not to share it. I thanked her and never listened to the recording. Some time later, I am invited to participate in a Quran reading and learning session, thanks to Meryam’s intercession with Farida, the vice-president of the NGO”.

These two examples from my field journal, recorded in July and April 2022 respectively, detail the process of obtaining Meryam’s consent to participate in my research. They highlight how consent is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that unfolds before, during, and after the research. In particular, the second excerpt highlights how research ethics ultimately

rest on individual ethical decisions. It might seem that, since Meryam willingly provided the recordings of the Quran lessons, the findings are legitimate and consensually obtained. However, knowing that consent had not been sought from the lesson participants, I concluded, based on my personal perceptions and moral code, that the material was not acquired with proper consent and therefore could not be used in my research. This decision is purely personal, evidenced by the fact that some colleagues, when discussing this example, indicated that they would not have made the same choice. In the first example, the issue of anonymity as a safeguard for personal safety proves to be limiting and degrading for Meryam, who prefers instead that her voice be heard, and her real name disclosed. A person's ideas and feelings can change, relationships can evolve, and external contexts can impact ethical decisions throughout the research. These factors cannot be neglected in research ethics.

To be able to establish these types of relationships with my fieldwork interlocutors, I determined that an environment of mutuality, kindness, and respect should be maintained throughout every stage of the ethnographic encounter. This approach comes from the field of feminist ethics and gender studies, which emphasize building relationships based on mutual care (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013; Cappelletto 2009). However, this method can also lead to concerns about emotional labor. The belief that more spontaneous and genuine relationships result in greater openness might unintentionally create pressure to forge emotional connections, thus pushing participants to disclose more than they might naturally be inclined to. (Duncombe and Jessop 2012).

Connected to this last point, the ethics of care raises questions about the selection of research subjects. Building relationships based on empathy and trust is often easier with individuals who share similar values, worldviews, or moral affinities. For instance, most studies in the anthropology of social movements favor those that researchers sympathize with, such as progressive movements and mobilizations supporting oppressed groups. In these studies, research ethics are tied to the moral duty of the researcher to give voice to the interlocutors or benefit the community (Gledhill 2000; Graeber 2004; Naepels 2019). On the contrary, studies focusing on conservative, fundamentalist, or authoritarian social, political, or religious movements are less common (Blee 2007; Harding 1991; Glassner et al. 2003). This imbalance can be attributed to factors such as difficulty accessing the field, researchers' discomfort with ideologies that starkly contrast with their own ethics, or a deliberate choice to avoid giving a voice to these groups (Avanza 2008; Zawadzki 2002). However, the lack of studies on these movements limits our understanding of the internal dynamics of groups that, despite being controversial, exert considerable influence on their societies.

The ethics of care brings with it possibilities and limits. Care often implies empathy, or “the ability to recognize cognitively the emotional state of another individual” which leads to perceptual, emotional, and cognitive involvement. Researchers who share values, affinities, and worldviews with their interlocutors can more easily generate trust and mutual understanding, as well as better comprehend the issues faced by their interlocutors. This level of involvement was not always present with my interlocutors. During fieldwork, I encountered political and moral positionings that conflicted with my ethical standpoints. My interlocutors often expressed sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and religious and cultural intolerance to varying degrees of intensity. Moreover, it was not uncommon to have discussions where I felt encouraged or pressured to endorse these worldviews, the very ones that, through my political commitment and personal choices, I am determined to eradicate from society.

How, then, can an empathic relationship be constructed if the researcher’s personal ethics clash with those of the interlocutors? To establish research ethics based on care, it was crucial to ethically acknowledge and methodologically address the discomfort and distress that emerged in the field (Piron 1996; Weber 2008). The following section describes and discusses the forms and reasons for this discomfort through various experiences in the field.

2.2 *Experiencing and Provoking Discomfort*

The dimension of discomfort is deeply embedded in anthropology for various reasons. At the inception of the discipline, anthropology focused on studying “the Other”, often culturally and spatially distant, which required researchers to uproot themselves from their own cultural origins, leading to forms of disorientation. This discomfort took on sadly notable forms, as documented in Malinowski’s personal field diary⁹¹. In the 1960s, anthropologists began addressing discomfort as they confronted the colonial, Eurocentric, and ethnocentric heritage of the discipline (Balandier 2001; Asad 1973). Anthropological literature on “sensitive subjects” acknowledges discomfort in ethnography as a fundamental human experience, considering it essential in the ethical and epistemological reflections that scholars should incorporate into their studies (Fielding 2016; Avanza 2008; Blee 1998).

⁹¹ *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* is a collection of personal notes and reflections written by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski during his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands between 1914–1915 and 1917–1918. These diaries have remained extremely controversial as they provide a candid and often unsettling insight into his thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the field, frequently revealing his private prejudices against his interlocutors.

Indeed, anthropology, more than other social sciences, relies on interpersonal exchanges as the foundation for (co)producing knowledge. This necessitates continually addressing and problematizing researchers' positions, methodologies, and their impact on the lives of those studied, and *vice-versa* (Barth and Turnbull 1974). Additionally, the sensitive nature of anthropological questions—often concerning identity, beliefs, and politics—can generate discomfort for both researchers and participants (Barratt and Maddox 2016). In this context, discomfort becomes crucial, leading to greater awareness and a more ethical, reflective research practice. Below, I will present three examples of moments of discomfort in my research, experienced by both my interlocutors and me.

During my ethnographic observations on the Facebook page of the student union group OREMA in Tétouan, I come across a post promoting an online seminar entitled “Abortion: Between Medicine, Religion, and Law” (fig. 3). Other posts on the page are opposed to abortion and Mudawana, the Moroccan Family Code⁹², but this is the first online event I encounter specifically dedicated to the topic. I immediately feel a mix of discomfort and the need to understand the themes behind this title better. Consequently, I decide to contact the administrator of the Facebook page for more information.



Fig. 3 Image on OREMA's Facebook page sponsoring a seminar on the topic “Abortion, Between Medicine, Religion and Law”, April 2020. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

I get to know Fatima, a 21-year-old woman and a third-year biology student at the Faculty of Sciences. She has been an activist for three years and explains that she became interested in OREMA because it is the only union that “defends students without going against

⁹² Initiated in 2004, the Mudawana (*mudawwana al-ahwāl al-shakhṣiyya*) is a significant step towards modernizing the country's legal framework and advancing social progress, by introducing reforms such as raising the minimum age for marriage to 18 and allowing women to marry without the consent of a legal guardian. Nonetheless, the Mudawana has faced widespread criticism, both from reformist feminist movements, which view it as an incomplete and insufficient reform (Sadiqi 2014), and from Islamist movements, which see it as a regime's move to appease the West (El Haitami 2016).

the values of the Kingdom of Morocco”. By this, she means that OREMA identifies with the current of “Progressive Islam” or “Moderate Islam” and claims to promote a system of Islamic values while accepting the constitutional monarchy, including both the secular and religious authority of the king⁹³. I ask her to tell me more about the post and the event. She happens to have participated in the seminar, livestreamed on the OREMA Settât’s Facebook page⁹⁴, where three specialists speak: a university professor of Islamic studies, a gynecologist, and a lawyer. She is happy to have attended because she learned about the risks women face when having an abortion in Morocco. She continues, saying that “it is the hand of God that shapes the fetus” and that “life is a gift from God that cannot be refused by humans”. We have several conversations on Facebook about the topic over the next few days until she asks for my opinion. I don’t know how to respond, so I take some time and do not reply immediately. Sometime later, she writes that she already knows my answer because she checked my Facebook profile and found a post supporting abortion rights movements in Chile. I feel uncomfortable explaining that sharing that post does not diminish my interest in understanding the reasons behind their event. After this episode, I decide to change my Facebook profile privacy settings and create a “professional” account, which I ended up never using.

The second experience of discomfort involves episodes of proselytism. While following Tariq in its activities as president of the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq, coastal prefecture in the province of Tétouan, I start to discuss with Muslim scholars about the differences and similarities between the Bible and the Quran. They soon ask about my religious background: “Are you a Catholic?”, “Are you interested in Islam for conversion?”. I explain that I grew up in a Catholic-Protestant family but did not receive a religious education, identifying myself as a non-believer with an academic interest in monotheistic religions, which I studied at university. Following this, I start frequently receiving questions like “How can you doubt the existence of God?” and I am encouraged to debate key passages from the Bible and the Quran, particularly those about Mary/Maryam and the birth and death of Jesus/Prophet *‘Īsā*⁹⁵.

⁹³ For a description of OREMA and Moroccan Student Unions, see Introduction, III.I.

⁹⁴ Settât is a city in central Morocco, located near Casablanca and capital of its namesake province. The Settât section of OREMA is one of the most influential branches in the national landscape.

⁹⁵ In the Bible (Gospels of Matthew and Luke), Mary is a virgin who conceives Jesus through the Holy Spirit and is present at his birth, crucifixion, and resurrection. In the Quran (suras Maryam and *‘āli ‘Imrān*), Maryam conceives Prophet *‘Īsā* by Allah’s will. While Jesus is the Son of God in the Bible, central to Christian faith, the Quran portrays *‘Īsā* as a revered prophet and denies his crucifixion, stating he was raised up to Allah.

The same sort of interactions is frequent with the group of women attending Al-Amal’s Quran lessons⁹⁶. When I wear the hijab to participate in a female Quran reading and learning session, I start receiving compliments on how beautiful I look with the veil. As our relationships grow, the women in the NGO encourage me to convert to Islam, often joking that I already have an Islamic name⁹⁷. Although I never feel pressured and understand these attitudes as signs of respect and trust, I still feel uncomfortable: it is a sensitive task to decline their proselytism, while trying to do so respectfully without losing their trust.

I have not only felt discomfort but also caused it, albeit unintentionally. At ulema council of M’diq, I meet Jamila, eldest daughter of Tariq. She is interested in MIDA, the research project in which I am conducting my PhD⁹⁸. I tell her that it was the only Innovative Training Network (ITN) dedicated exclusively to social sciences and humanities to be funded by the European Commission in the year the project was approved, as ITNs are normally more focused on technologies and hard sciences. When she learns about the project’s theme—understanding the impact of digitization and technological innovation on Islam and Muslim societies—her expression becomes puzzled. “Isn’t it curious that the European Union funds research on Islam while its politicians spread hate against Muslims in Europe?” she asks; then continues, “Isn’t it interesting that a research project on today’s Islam is funded by Western countries?”. She then shares her experiences of racism and Islamophobia as a young university student in France.

I could have pointed out that the racist and anti-Muslim rhetoric comes from some members of the European Parliament, a body separate from the European Commission⁹⁹; or that most of the PhD contracts funded by the MIDA project were awarded to people from predominantly Muslim countries in the Global South. Instead, I remained silent, recognizing a mix of discomfort, indignation, and resignation in his gaze. Later, in many of our conversations about Islam and politics in Morocco, she often brings up this point, jokingly saying, “You won’t tell Europe what I say, right?”. I recognized that her critique precisely underscored my ethical discomfort about being funded by an agency that holds significant legislative and executive power over the topic of “Islam in Europe”.

⁹⁶ For a description of Al-Amal, see Introduction, III.I.

⁹⁷ In Morocco, my name is often shortened to Nour, which means “light” in Arabic.

⁹⁸ For a description of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, the Innovative Training Network, and the MIDA project, see Introduction, I.

⁹⁹ Several far-right parties in the European Parliament are known for their Islamophobic rhetoric. Notable examples include the party Brothers of Italy, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the Dutch Party for Freedom, led by Geert Wilders, the Spanish VOX party, and the National Rally in France. See Naz Sahah, “Euroviews. Islamophobia is surging throughout Europe. Here’s how we stop it”, *Euronews*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/01/31/islamophobia-is-surging-throughout-europe-heres-how-we-stop-it>

Several overarching themes connect the different experiences of ethical discomfort described here. In the first case, discomfort was related to crucial elements of the ethnographic method: self-presentation and gaining trust. In an online environment, where the reliability of the subject is based on the amount of shared personal content (tastes, preferences, opinions), the discomfort arose from the vulnerability I felt in not having control over the amount of information I wanted to share, or not share, with my interlocutors. Issues of ethical discomfort related to the researcher positionality and reflexivity emerge in the second example. Not sharing the same cultural background and beliefs is not an obstacle to research, but it can become one when the researcher and interlocutors' adherence to a precise ontology is important for establishing mutual trust, confidence, and respect. In the third example, the discomfort felt by Jamila allowed me to uncover often hidden power dynamics. These dynamics need to be highlighted, analyzed, and deconstructed to prevent anthropology from perpetuating common forms of culturalism and domination.

What, then, is the “right distance” to maintain between the researcher and the interlocutor in ethnographic fieldwork? According to anthropologist Alban Bensa, the concept of the “right distance” is intrinsic to anthropology and presents a significant dilemma:

“Either the familiarity with the aimed society is too great and the ethnologist, deprived of any hindsight, risks producing analyses in the form of paraphrases; or this proximity is too weak and the strangeness of the other remains intact, even if this failure is offset by an excess of philosophic-anthropological subtleties which attribute to the indigenous society unverifiable reasoning” (Bensa 1995, 131).

The anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada has shown that the right distance in ethnography is not about keeping researchers halfway between themselves and the social reality they study, but rather about continually navigating between the various roles assigned to them by their interlocutors (Favret-Saada 1977). The challenging aspect is that, to identify and report on these roles, ethnographers need to question both their own categories of perception and those of their interlocutors, while *simultaneously* being immersed in it (Althabe, Fabre, and Lenclud 1992; Althabe 1990). In this methodological dilemma—observing a given social reality *while* also participating in it—lies the most interesting innovation of the ethnographic approach. Any illusion of a supposed detachment from the social context is therefore not only scientifically incorrect but also unproductive (Cefaï 2010). Hence, the ethnographic method facilitates the introduction of reflexivity—a posture of self-analysis concerning feelings, reactions, and motivations that the researcher brings to the study—as an epistemological,

ethical, and methodological research tool. In subchapter 2.3, I detail the set of reflective and objectifying methods I adopted during my research, which I have termed “assemblage reflexivity”.

2.3 Towards “Assemblage Reflexivity”

When it comes to reflexive methods in anthropology, there are as many approaches as there are anthropologists. Tools for reflexivity must be adapted case by case, as reflexivity involves the researcher’s self-analysis of their point of view, biases, and patterns. Experiencing discomfort during research led me to adopt a specific reflexive posture, the theoretical basis of which draws from two distinct sources: the posture outlined by anthropologists James Clifford and George E. Marcus in the collective book *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and the approach theorized by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the article *L’Objectivation Participante* (Bourdieu 2003).

These two postures can easily be defined as divergent. Bourdieu himself highlights this in the opening paragraphs of his article, where he criticizes—with a note of irony—Clifford and Marcus’ book for proposing an approach that involves “observing by observing oneself, observing the observers in their work of observation or transcription of their observations” (Ibid., 43). Indeed, the ambition of *Writing Culture*, to start a new experimental phase in ethnographic writing resulted more in a fetishization of text and narration. Some contributors focused more on literary techniques and the portrayal of ethnography as fiction, which diverted attention from the concrete implementation of ethnographic investigation methods (Tyler 1986).

Bourdieu’s approach aims to maintain the scientific quality of ethnographic investigation without reverting to the “distant gaze” of the positivist ethnographer. As a social scientist, Bourdieu has worked to reveal the mechanisms by which the social world appears “taken for granted”, “natural”, and “familiar”, and thus unlikely to be questioned. “Participant objectivation” is Bourdieu’s enterprise for challenging this “appearance”. The sociologist urges researchers to objectivate “the subject of the objectivation” (Bourdieu 2003, 43) that is, to analyze the social conditions influencing the researcher’s own experience of objectivation. These conditions are tied to researchers’ engagement in the investigation and their position within the environment in which they operate. This approach helps social researchers avoid falling into automatic cognitive patterns generated by frequently used intellectual operations that may become habitual in research—and can be implemented in a very concrete way:

“The first task of the researcher is to become aware of their own categories of perception of the social world and to produce knowledge about the instruments through which we understand it. This can be approached in a very concrete way. Everyone can do this work practically. Who am I, socially, to say what I say? Given the variables that characterize me (my age, gender, occupation, relationship to the educational system, relationship to the workplace, number of years I have been unemployed, etc.), what categories of perception am I likely to apply to the person I am observing?”(Bourdieu 1984, 233).

Bourdieu exhorts social researchers to adopt a posture of objectivation, not just of the ethnographer conducting the research, but of the social world that shaped the ethnographer. This includes not only their social milieu and position but also their specific role within the microcosm of their discipline, encompassing its shared values and traditions, as well as its constraints and censures. In *Writing Culture*, anthropologists George Marcus and Paul Rabinow follow Bourdieu’s approach by highlighting, beyond the “poetics” of the ethnographic text, the major pressures that weigh on anthropology through its “politics”. These include the colonial heritage, inequalities between researchers and those they study without giving them a voice, the hidden biases in data produced in contexts influenced by the anthropologist, and the rhetorical processes that establish scientific authority (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Beyond the critique of narrative experimentation in ethnographic writing, the authors of *Writing Culture* are notable for moving away from the positivism of the dominant Malinowskian paradigm, which portrayed “the indigenous” as nearly immutable. *Writing Culture* transformed the field of anthropology by encouraging anthropologists to become more aware of their biases and the power dynamics inherent in their work.

Both approaches aim to overcome the metadiscourses of anthropology by deconstructing the charismatic image of social scientists and their presumed independence from social bias. However, I argue that Bourdieu’s method achieves this objective in a more systematic manner. The authors of *Writing Culture* reduce ethnography to its textual expression, but awareness of style and rhetoric in ethnographic texts alone is not sufficient to deconstruct the positivist and colonial legacy. Participant objectivation, on the other hand, allows researchers to objectify themselves by observing their mental and physical patterns of

perception and action, often independent of their consciousness and intention¹⁰⁰. This reflexive objectivation extends beyond textual production to encompass the entire process of knowledge production.

Nonetheless, the power of *Writing Culture* lies in its call to reform ethnographic practices and anthropology as a whole. Published in the United States in the 1980s, during a period of fervent demand for social and political change, it was one of the first books to propose a program for renewing anthropology¹⁰¹. It urged the discipline to confront and address its weaknesses, rather than merely denouncing them. Forty years later, amid a global crisis, this message is more relevant than ever. Anthropology in the COVID era faces upheavals that require it to redefine its role and develop new frameworks to understand an ever-changing and increasingly demanding social world. *Writing Culture* marks the beginning of an anthropology that evolves not only because science demands it, but also because society, as both the object of study and the context of its production, compels it (Rabinow 1986).

As an echo to *Writing Culture's* call for change, *A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography*, published during the pandemic by anthropologist Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, also propose “imperative” reorientation of anthropology, and namely ethnography, towards new methodological and theoretical approach that they call “patchwork ethnography”. According to the authors, the neoliberal university labor conditions, the “feminization” of anthropology, expectations of work-life balance, environmental concerns, feminist and decolonial critiques of anthropology, and now COVID, have shown that the traditional image of the anthropologist as always ready to test the boundaries of self, and the idea of fieldwork as lengthy and distant, are no longer conceivable or compatible (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe

¹⁰⁰ Bourdieu conceive participant objectivation as an empirical research practice supporting his social theory, presented as a theory of the social space. In this space, individuals and groups are positioned based on the types of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) they mobilize according to their habitus, which is the set of dispositions manifesting as mental and bodily patterns of perception, appreciation, and action. These capitals determine individuals' positions within the social space and their relationships with one another. Bourdieu's social geometry examines how these various forms of capital interact to create inequalities and influence behaviors and perceptions, providing insight into power dynamics and social inequalities (*Inter alia* Bourdieu 1979; 1980).

¹⁰¹ I refer here to the postmodern turn which has challenged the claims of objectivity in traditional anthropological practice, emphasizing the constructed nature of ethnographic knowledge. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, through his concept of “thick description” (Geertz 1973, 3), played a pivotal role in fostering critical reflection on the relationship between the anthropologist and the field. Postmodern scholars, built on this approach by extending it in a more explicitly political direction, foregrounding the ethical and political dimensions of fieldwork and critically interrogating the position of the observer within a postcolonial context. Significantly, Morocco, as a field site for both Geertz and anthropologist Paul Rabinow—a prominent figure in the postmodern turn—converged these epistemological approaches (Geertz, Geertz, and Rosen 1979; Geertz 1971; Rabinow 1977).

2020). Thus, to move beyond these outdated constructions, the authors advocate for an ethnographic approach composed of interwoven pieces, a patchwork:

“Patchwork ethnography begins from the acknowledgement that recombinations of “home” and “field” have now become necessities—more so in the face of the current pandemic. By *patchwork ethnography*, we refer to ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork [...], while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production”. (Ibid.)

Patchwork ethnography calls to explore how and what forms of knowledge and methods can emerge, not out of a need to adapt to research subjects or fieldwork, but from a necessity to fit researchers’ own lives and their multiple professional and personal commitments. During the 2020 lockdown, while struggling with anxious feelings about the future of my research and the wellbeing of myself and others, these words resonated as a strong encouragement to develop a methodological framework¹⁰² and an epistemological foundation¹⁰³ *starting from* and *through* my personal and professional life, engagements, and commitments. Thus, I developed a model of reflexive (auto)analysis that incorporates the message of renewal and political consciousness proposed in *Writing Culture*, that integrates the scientific rigor and social engagement of Bourdieu’s participant objectivation, and that embraces the deconstruction advocated in *A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography*. I named this model “assemblage reflexivity”.

Derived from the French word for combining various elements, “assemblage” also refers to an artistic technique that originated with the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century and influenced the art world through at least the 1960s (fig. 2). Unlike the patchwork technique, which involves sewing together pieces of the same material, assemblage is the process of joining objects of different uses, colors, shapes, and textures to create a heterogeneous yet coherent whole. The key idea here is extrapolating an object from its original context and function and repurposing it as part of a new ensemble. Building on this reflection,

¹⁰² For an analysis of the methodology employed in this thesis, see chapter 3.

¹⁰³ For an analysis of the epistemological basis underlying this research, see chapter 1.

I developed techniques from different fields of knowledge and expertise, forming a methodological assemblage that supported my reflexive posture (Elliott and Culhane 2017; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Ellis 2004; Freidenberg 1998). These methods can be organized according to their objectives: on one hand, to gain perspective and objectify the field; on the other hand, to facilitate self-analysis of my biases, emotions, and attitudes both inside and outside the field. Under the first category are: writing techniques applied to field notes, filming the fieldwork, and reading groups. Under the second category are: video-making, body-mapping techniques, and word brainstorming. Some of these methods were conducted individually, while others were implemented in groups¹⁰⁴.

The reflexive approach proposed here aims to objectify not only the fieldwork and the relationships built within it but also the lived experience of conducting research online and offline within Islam-oriented groups in a Global South country, from the perspective of a European, non-believer, white woman who has recently moved to a foreign country, during a global pandemic, and as part of an internationally funded EU research program. As summarized by the *Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography*, it is time to deconstruct the colonial, racist, and sexist myth of the adventurer-anthropologist ready to explore distant, untouched civilizations, and instead face the reality of today's challenges in ethnography. Similarly, the methodology used to collect, process, and analyze data from both offline and online fields had to be adapted to the personal and professional challenges encountered during my PhD journey. Therefore, in an effort to address these needs while maintaining scientific rigor, I developed an assemblage of methods drawn from disciplines and fields of knowledge typically considered distant from conventional anthropology. I called this methodology NEThnography. The following chapter is dedicated to describing this methodology and its related challenges and possibilities.

¹⁰⁴ For a comprehensive list of methods utilized for assemblage reflexivity along with their respective goals, see Appendix 2.

NETHNOGRAPHY: HYBRID QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY



*Fig. 4 Ḥalqa in El Hadim Square, Meknes, Central Morocco, March 2018.
Photo and editing by Eleonora Landucci. © Eleonora Landucci.*

As outlined in the Introduction, my fieldwork was conducted in the city of Tétouan in Northern Morocco and on several Facebook pages of three Islam-oriented groups. The objective was to observe how Islam, as a societal project in Morocco, is conceived, communicated, and propagated by these groups both online and offline. Given my interest in observing the everyday practices, discourses, convictions, and beliefs of groups and individuals, the anthropological method proved to be the most suitable. However, this approach presented several methodological challenges: Is conducting a semi-directed interview in front of a computer screen equivalent to an in-person interview? How does “participant observation” translate within the context of Facebook? How can trust be established with individuals when face-to-face encounters are not possible? These questions prompt reflections on how the digital realm, as an instrument, method, field, and subject of research, could interact with and potentially renew ethnographic theories and methodologies.

Faced with this reality, which falls outside the frameworks of classical ethnographic research, I developed a methodology that integrates multimodal and multidisciplinary approaches. I termed these methods “NEThnography”, where “NET” stands for “network”, representing the nature of human interactions, the connection between online and offline environments in my fieldwork, and the assemblage of diverse methods employed in this research. In constructing this methodology, informed by the literature on online qualitative research and the realities of fieldwork, “sensitivity” emerged as a frequently discussed concept. Consequently, I addressed “sensitivity”, along with “precarity” and “vulnerability”, as both epistemological issue and methodological tool in developing my methodology.

Developing a methodology for research conducted through and about the Internet necessitates innovative methods of data collection and analysis while maintaining an in-depth, situated, and comprehensive approach to observing everyday online interactions. I argue that, despite the numerous challenges involved, the anthropological approach, with its bottom-up perspective on the analysis of socio-cultural phenomena, has the potential to challenge the notion of a universally standardized online world (E. G. Coleman 2010). In the following subchapters, I delve into the details of the NEThnographic methodology. Firstly, I explore and question the “sensitive character” associated with my research by analyzing what constitutes “sensitive data” in the constantly evolving environment of the Internet (3.1). Next, I provide a brief overview of the field of Internet qualitative research, focusing on the digital anthropology approach (3.2). Finally, I present a detailed exploration of the various methods that comprise NEThnography (3.3).

3.1 What is “Sensitive”... And How to Get Rid of It?

In social sciences research, vulnerability generally refers to the physical, social, and psychological *conditions* experienced by living entities, while sensitivity is often described as a *characteristic* that can apply to both living and non-living entities. “Being sensitive” is considered an expected quality researchers should possess when engaging with their interlocutors. Research topics themselves can also be sensitive, such as those involving physical or psychological illnesses, illicit activities, religious beliefs, or political convictions, and so on. Finally, sensitivity can describe certain types of data, like names, birth dates, gender, and sexual orientation, commonly refer to as “sensitive data”. Building upon these premises, the existing literature on the topic associates the term “sensitive” with factors like danger, intimacy, sacralization, stigmatization, confidentiality, controversy (Fielding 2016; Paechter 2012).

The word “sensitive” often emerged in relation to my research topic for two main reasons. Firstly, when explaining that my research focused on online and offline presence of Islam-oriented groups in Morocco, I frequently received comments about the “sensitive nature” of my work and the information I might gather. Secondly, conducting fieldwork online increased the perceived sensitivity of my research. Issues surrounding the “ownership” and “control” of information once posted on social media, along with related challenges, contribute to the perception that Internet research is inherently “sensitive”. However, behind these statements lie common assumptions that need to be addressed to explore the question: “What is sensitive?”

The first assumption concerns how the object “Islam” is perceived in Western societies, particularly in Europe. As shown by the biannual European islamophobia report, over the past decades, the idea that Islam represents a potential danger as a radical, oppressive, and reactionary civilization, religion, *and* political force has taken hold in the collective consciousness (Bayrakli and Hafez 2023). This perception has spread through Islamophobic, nationalist, and racist political discourses that associate Islam and Muslim communities with threats to national security (Ibid. 2023, 9). This narrative has been amplified by nationalist and populist movements, which use Islamophobia as a tool to rally support and justify exclusionary policies. Media representation has played a significant role in echoing these messages, with the portrayal of Islam often associated to terrorism and extremism (Ibid. 2023, 13). Finally, historical conflicts and geopolitical tensions have also fueled mistrust, and a lack of understanding and cultural exchange has perpetuated ignorance and misconceptions about Islam (Geisser 2003).

Islamophobia, now an integral part of the European neoliberal governance system¹⁰⁵, has had concrete consequences on my fieldwork. When I presented my research topics to the members of Al-Amal, OREMA Tétouan, and the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq, I noticed how strange it seemed to them to see a European taking interest in Islamic cultures and societies. Issam, a 23-year-old student in his second year of biology at the Faculty of Sciences in Tétouan and one of the leaders of the OREMA union group, sends me an ironic text

¹⁰⁵ The implementation of more or less explicit racist and Islamophobic agenda often serves as a tactic to divert public attention away from reforms that undermine social rights, deepen economic inequalities, and enforce austerity measures. In France, economic crisis has frequently been followed by the introduction of policies targeting immigrant and Muslim communities. In 1995, the pension reform project was followed the next year by the Debré immigration law of 1996. In 2008, the economic crisis was succeeded by a national debate on “the French identity” in 2009, which brought divisive rhetoric to the forefront. Most recently, in 2023, the pension reform was paired with the Darmanin Immigration Law and a directive from the Ministry of Education, which banned the wearing of the abaya in schools by the year’s end (Wolfreys 2023).

message: “I thought everyone in Europe hated Muslims hhhhhhhh¹⁰⁶”. We discuss Islamophobia in Europe several times with Issam, often provoking feelings of anger, pain, and resignation in him. This example from the fieldwork highlights that it wasn’t my research topic that was inherently sensitive. Rather, the stigmatization that Issam felt, resulting from European racist and Islamophobic stereotypes, generated sensitive discussions that evoked, among other things, existing power structures between Northern and Southern global countries.

The second assumption about my research topic concerns the idea that the Internet is a sensitive topic. This belief stems from the notion that only face-to-face interactions are considered “real”, while online interactions are seen as “fake” and therefore riskier, with potential for unreliability, dishonesty, and abuse. This assumption, besides perpetuating the hierarchy of authenticity between online and offline interactions, proved to be incorrect. My initial connection with Fatima, the administrator of the OREMA Tétouan Facebook page, occurred online, and it was through this virtual interaction that she gradually developed enough trust in me to introduce me to the wider group of OREMA Tétouan members. When we finally met in person, she commented, “I don’t know if we would have ever met if you hadn’t messaged me on Facebook”. Fatima considers herself shy, so the anonymity of the online platform facilitates her willingness to share. Additionally, since I do not write or speak Arabic well, and she cannot understand English, French, or Spanish, we use Google Translate to communicate, which further aids our interaction.

Even though the Internet cannot be considered an inherently “sensitive subject”, ethical issues related to data gathering and collection exist. Addressing these ethical challenges is crucial in conducting responsible and respectful online research. When delving into the literature of Internet qualitative research, authors emphasize the importance of implementing codes of conduct for the protection of sensitive (digital) data¹⁰⁷. However, as I previously demonstrated, relying solely on standardized ethical guidelines can be inaccurate or even

¹⁰⁶ These sequences of “h” correspond to the onomatopoeic typing of laughing in Arabic.

¹⁰⁷ Social media scholar Robert Kozinets has outlined four guidelines to follow when conducting online ethnography: “(1) The researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research; (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to informants; and (3) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched. The fourth procedure is specific to the online medium: (4) The researcher should take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue”. This procedure requires the researcher to contact community members and obtain their permission (informed consent) to use any specific postings that are to be directly quoted in the research” (Kozinets 2002, 65).

counterproductive¹⁰⁸. When entering a Facebook page for fieldwork purposes, I always introduced myself and explained my research, asking for permission to read, observe, and potentially collect comments, conversations, and images. However, I often encountered situations where I was unable to contact the owner of a comment or an image because their Facebook profile was inactive. Similarly, during social media scraping¹⁰⁹, I always asked permission from Facebook groups and pages' administrators, however it was not possible to obtain consent from every owner of the comments and posts.

In these cases, standardized guidelines proved insufficient to effectively address such issues (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Entering the field cannot be a one-time request, and informed consent cannot be limited to a single agreement; both actions must be an ongoing process throughout the research, with a primary focus is on avoiding harm to participants, others, and the surrounding environment (Ploug 2009). As anthropologists Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan state, "because "harm" is always defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally. That is, rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context"(Markham and Buchanan 2012, 3).

Following case-by-case practical judgment concerning sensitive data management sometimes resulted in tensions with the institutional framework within which I was operating. According to MIDA's Grant Agreement (*MIDA Grant Agreement* 2018, 11), my colleagues and I were expected to develop a Data Management Plan that included, to the best of our abilities, the FAIR principles for collecting, storing, and sharing our research datasets¹¹⁰. FAIR stands for Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable data. These are key principles of the Open Science movement, which aims to remove barriers to sharing outputs, resources, methods, and tools at all stages of the research process¹¹¹. While I support this ethical approach, I encountered difficulties in producing FAIR datasets because, according to the definition, data should be:

Findable. Data and supplementary materials have sufficiently rich metadata and a unique and persistent identifier.

¹⁰⁸ I refer to subchapters 1.3 and 2.3, which examine the epistemological and ethical framework guiding my fieldwork.

¹⁰⁹ In subchapter 3.3, I provide an analysis of social media scraping, examining its applications in my research.

¹¹⁰ For the template of the Data Management Plan provided by the MIDA project, see Appendix 3.

¹¹¹ For the Ethical Report containing the FAIR principle of this research, see Appendix 1.

Accessible. Metadata and data are understandable to humans and machines. Data is deposited in a trusted repository.

Interoperable. Metadata use a formal, accessible, shared, and broadly applicable language for knowledge representation.

Reusable. Data and collections have a clear usage license and provide accurate information on provenance.

A significant portion of my data includes informal and formal conversations, observations, filming, photographing, and drawing which contain personal information such as faces, names, dates of birth, religious/political/sexual orientations, voices, and so on. Adhering to the FAIR principles in handling ethnographic data risks potentially compromising the security of the research participants. On the other hand, omitting or removing these elements when FAIRifying data would result in a loss of context and understanding for third parties. This issue is particularly evident with anonymization in ethnographic interviews. While anonymization is often suggested as a solution to comply with FAIR principles, complete anonymity is unattainable and undesirable in anthropological research. The significance of ethnographic data lies in the specific attributes of the individuals and the contextual circumstances of their interactions. Removing these contextual details to FAIR the data, risks compromising or distorting the findings they provide.

Navigating the principles of open access and open science within the framework of the MIDA project has prompted me to critically reflect on its principles and practices. This approach increases accessibility to research outputs, fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge sharing, and enhances transparency, leading to more robust and impactful scientific findings. However, it is important to recognize the potential pitfalls and challenges that open access poses for anthropology. The movement originated in the natural sciences and has primarily evolved to address the specific needs of that field. When considering the openness of my research data, especially those from online research, I have come to prioritize a sense of closure rather than an inclination toward openness. Instead of adhering to “as open as possible” to prevent the reproducibility crisis in science, I embraced the principle of “as closed as necessary” to avoid harm. By prioritizing closure over openness, I address the potential risks and ethical concerns associated with sharing ethnographic data, safeguarding the integrity of the research process and the well-being of its participants. This approach underscores the importance of case-by-case judgment in managing sensitive data, even if it means contravening innovative yet overly generalized data collection protocols.

With the thought-provoking question of this subchapter's title: "... and how to get rid of it?", I want to emphasize that all data can be sensitive, and standardized codes of conduct may not always be appropriate. Therefore, the various tensions and uncertainties in qualitative research on Internet are best addressed by researchers as they arise (Hine 2015). While open science aims to make data and metadata comprehensible to both humans and machines, anthropologists face unique situations that challenge predefined criteria for accessible datasets. As media scholar Katrin Tiidenberg states, "in our networked and digitally saturated environment, we are all a step or mishap away from being vulnerable; from all data being sensitive". Recognizing that ambiguity and uncertainty are part of the scientific process allows us to view questions like "what is sensitive?" and "who is vulnerable?" as opportunities to navigate the realities of fallibility, changeability, unpredictability, and uncontrollability in research and, ultimately, life itself.

3.2 Anthropology in the Digital Age

The continuous opportunities and challenges presented by the Internet prompt ethnographers to reconsider not only various categories of analysis within their field of research, as highlighted by the concept of "sensitivity", but also the relevance of their methods. Since the 1990s, as the Internet began integrating daily life, qualitative researchers have focused on the epistemological and methodological implications of this field. The revolution brought by the Internet challenged established social science categories. Early debates centered on whether online interactions should be seen as "real life" or "virtual life" (Turkle 1995) and whether the Internet was a "space" or a "cultural product" (Woolgar and Dutton 1996; Benedikt 1991). As the Internet's role in social sciences expanded, it raised further questions about critical categories such as "time", "communication", and "identity" (Horst and Miller 2012b; Hine 2000). The Internet's transformative and evolving nature continues to challenge researchers. The term itself is ambiguous, covering various meanings and undergoing numerous changes. What was once described as a network of constantly shifting networks (Jones 1999) has evolved. Today's Internet is seen as "the foundation for more diverse and naturalized forms of mediatization, transmediation, and remediation than seen before the mid-1990s" (Markham 2017, 3).

Given the pervasive influence of digital media on contemporary society's modes of being, practices, and beliefs, the increasing importance of online fieldwork and methods in anthropology is undeniable. Delving into the literature, terms such as "online", "virtual",

“cyber”, and “digital” often prefix “anthropology” or “ethnography”. These prefixes can refer to the use of ethnographic methods to investigate online contexts (online), the application of online research methods in ethnographic studies (virtual), or the observation of the Internet as a cultural artefact (cyber), although distinctions are not always sharply defined (Hjorth et al. 2016). Among these approaches, digital ethnography presents itself as the most holistic. Unlike perspectives that focus on studying the Internet’s impact as a cultural product or context, digital anthropology was established to adapt anthropological research practices to address the profound integration of digital media into human life (Horst and Miller 2012a). This encompasses not only addressing the impacts of the widespread use of digital technologies on populations, but also exploring how these technologies are incorporated into anthropological methodologies, and studying specific digital technologies (for instance, social media platforms). In this sense, anthropologist Daniel Miller emphasizes that digital anthropology recognizes the importance of the Internet as an environment, infrastructure, and material entity in research sites (Horst and Miller 2012b). Acknowledging this requires questioning assumed viewpoints, adapting research techniques, and redefining theoretical concepts to reflect the specificities of the fieldwork.

The underlying principle of digital anthropology is that the virtual and physical realms can no longer be viewed as separate entities, challenging assumptions about the universal nature of digital experiences (Dalsgaard 2016). Digital anthropologists argue that digital technologies alone do not drive social transformation; rather, it is the way these technologies are implemented and reappropriated by local communities that impacts specific social worlds (E. G. Coleman 2010). However, provincializing the gaze on digital technologies does not dismiss their extensive global impact. By exploring how digital media shape and are shaped by local beliefs, actions, and identities, digital anthropology reveals the intricate interplay between local practices and the global impact of digitization. In this sense, it is important to develop innovative research tools that effectively examine contextualized socio-cultural dynamics by considering individual experiences of the Internet. Following this approach, in subchapter 2.3, I outline the general principles of what I have defined as NETnography.

3.3 The NEThnographic Method

Drawing from digital anthropology theories and the specific characteristics of my research topic, I developed a methodology that assembles various techniques from different

disciplines, similar to what I did for my reflexive approach¹¹². I named this methodology NEThnography, inspired by the term introduced by Robert Kozinets in his book “Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online” (Kozinets 2010)¹¹³.

As mentioned, the term “network” refers to three key aspects. Firstly, it signifies the focus of my investigation, which is centered around human discourses and actions. These interactions, whether online or offline, are never binary but are part of an interconnected web of relationships. Recognizing the networked nature of these interactions helps to understand their impact within a given social context. Secondly, “network” highlights the importance of considering the interplay between the online and offline world, which I describe as hybrid¹¹⁴, rather than rigidly adhering rigid boundaries. Thirdly, “network” represents the interconnection of the various methods I employed, gathering tools from different disciplines, and assembling them coherently for my investigation. The capitalization of “NET” in NEThnography emphasizes its dual theoretical and empirical, which forms the basis of the methodology.

The theoretical dimension of NEThnography draws upon the contributions of sociologists Christine Hine, who developed an “embedded, embodied, and everyday ethnography for the Internet” (Hine 2015), and Roser Beneito-Montagut, who proposed an “expanded ethnography” (Beneito-Montagut 2011). In line with their work, I advocate for ethnography as a valuable approach to understanding the social experiences that emerge from people’s interactions with the Internet. NEThnography rests on the premise that there is no universal experience of the Internet; instead, it recognizes that the Internet engenders local, specific, and personal experiences influenced by socio-cultural contexts. Ethnography can therefore play a significant role in analyzing socio-cultural localized and contextualized meanings and significances of the Internet.

Introducing the concept of the “E3 Internet” (Hine 2015, 19), Hine outlines three fundamental dimensions of the Internet: its deep Embeddedness in various contexts of daily life, interwoven with social, cultural, and economic aspects; the Embodiment of online experiences through the body and senses, which are not separate from physical reality but are connected to and influenced by our real-world experiences; and its Everyday presence in our daily routines. Building on Hine’s theory, the NEThnographic method challenges the notion of a clear-cut boundary between online and offline, exploring how the Internet intertwines

¹¹² For further details on the reflexive approach elaborated for this research, see in 2.3.

¹¹³ It is important to note that Kozinets’ work primarily focuses on marketing research, and besides the wordplay involving “network”, his work is unrelated to the methodology I have developed.

¹¹⁴ The concepts of “hybrid” and “hybridization” is thoroughly explored in Part 3, chapter 7.

with and influences everyday experiences. With the rise of digital devices like smartphones, digital services such as affordable Internet, and digital media like social platforms, the fluidity between online and offline spheres has grown exponentially (Berry and Hamilton 2010; Jordan 2009; Kriem 2009). This has led to phenomena where physical spaces are reimaged and represented in virtual spaces, while the dynamics and interactions characteristic of online environments simultaneously shape and influence practices in offline spaces, and *vice-versa*¹¹⁵.

Using ethnographic methods to study the Internet does not necessitate a drastic readaptation of tools and theories within the discipline to keep up with the rapid evolutions of digital media. In this regard, Beneito-Montagut affirms that qualitative ethnographic methodology is already in possession of tools to explore the Internet. Starting from the Internet users' perspective, the expanded ethnography approach proposed by Beneito-Montagut explores various strategies, including multi-situated observation of Internet users, combining online and offline techniques such as face-to-face interviews and field journals, and using flexible, multimedia data collection methods (Beneito-Montagut 2011, 725). However, while adhering to the expanded ethnography method, the NEThnographic approach analyzes the interplay between online and offline interactions, acknowledging their specificities and the complexity of various organizational settings and relationships.

The empirical dimension of NEThnography addresses the distinct features and complexities of online and offline contexts and interactions through a multidisciplinary and multimodal approach. This approach fulfills the following criteria: Firstly, it provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of people's experiences online. Unlike disembodied algorithms that lack the means to examine socio-cultural phenomena on the Internet, human researchers—immersed in specific temporal, historical, and cultural contexts and equipped with anthropological training—are better suited to exploring aspects of contextualized online experiences such as identity expressions, ritual practices, and forms of communication. Secondly, NEThnography studies human interaction beyond the boundaries of offline and online spheres. Through reflexive approaches to understand the embodied Internet, it offers a richer comprehension of the depth, richness, and diversity of digital media use in everyday life. Lastly, this method employs a multimodal and multidisciplinary approach. A contextualized empirical approach based on multimodal data collection methods is essential for a holistic understanding of individuals' online and offline presence.

¹¹⁵ The analysis of the "hybridization" of spaces and the "re-signification" of interactions within the context of Islam-oriented groups forms the core of the ethnographic research underpinning this thesis, as detailed in Part 3, particularly in chapters 7 and 8.

Contributing to the expansion of ethnography's interdisciplinary nature, the third criterion of the NEThnographic method includes the integration of quantitative methods from the field of Digital Humanities (DH) such as social media scraping and digital data analytics. The academic field of DH integrates technology-driven approaches with traditional social sciences and humanities disciplines¹¹⁶. As mentioned in the Introduction¹¹⁷, DH were a key focus of the MIDA project, with DH training included in the joint research plan (*MIDA Grant Agreement* 2018, 119). Additionally, the impact of COVID, which prevented offline fieldwork for nearly a year, led me to further engage with DH tools. While qualitative methods like online interviews and participant observations remained primary data collection tools, DH techniques, especially using Python, helped define the field scope and identify trends in online interactions.

Python is a widely used programming language with a broad range of applications across various fields¹¹⁸. Python's popularity is largely due to its user-friendly design, featuring a simple and intuitive syntax that allows beginners to start coding quickly and effectively. This programming language offers numerous advantages for online qualitative research on social media, particularly for text analysis. It provides tools that facilitate web scraping, data extraction, data collection, and data analysis, such as libraries, collections, and dictionaries¹¹⁹. Additionally, it offers intuitive Natural Language Processing packages that are particularly helpful to analyzing text data from social media sources¹²⁰. The following examples illustrate the integration of Python within NEThnography for extracting and collecting social media data from Facebook.

¹¹⁶ Media scholar Steven E. Jones notes that DH emerged alongside technological advancements such as mobile technologies, Web 2.0, and social media. It encompasses practices and areas of interest that intersect computational science, digital media, and research and teaching in the humanities (Jones 2013).

¹¹⁷ For further details on Digital Humanities implemented within the MIDA project, see Introduction I.I.

¹¹⁸ Created by Guido Van Rossum and released in 1991, Python is today employed in web development, data analysis, artificial intelligence, automation, and so on.

¹¹⁹ In Python, a "collection" is a data structure used to store and manipulate groups of items. A "library" is a set of pre-written functions that provide specific functionality, while a "dictionary" is a collection that allows you to associate values with unique keys and efficiently retrieve the corresponding values. In other words, a collection is a container that holds multiple items, such as libraries and dictionaries, a library is a toolbox with various tools for specific tasks, while a dictionary stores items with unique labels (keys) for easy retrieval, much like a phone book for finding numbers associated to specific names.

¹²⁰ NLP packages in Python are libraries that provide tools and functions for processing and analyzing human language data. These packages help with tasks such as tokenization, parsing, and sentiment analysis, making it easier to work with large volumes of text data from sources like social media.

3.3.1 Analyzing Facebook Comment Using Python

For quantitative analyses, such as identifying the most frequently used languages in Facebook groups, calculating the average number of posts per year on Facebook pages, and determining the frequency of hashtags in posts on Islam-oriented pages, I used specific Python libraries and dictionaries. To illustrate this, I will use the example of extracting comments from the OREMA Tétouan Facebook page. The main challenge in extracting and collecting data from Facebook is its privacy policy, which prohibits automated web scraping and only allows manual web inspection¹²¹. To manually extract comments, I accessed the underlying HTML code that makes up the Facebook webpage through the “inspect” function available in most browsers. This revealed the HTML structure, showing how various elements, such as comments, images, texts, links, and so on, are coded (fig. 5). These codes serve to establish the rules that determine the expected actions within the program¹²².

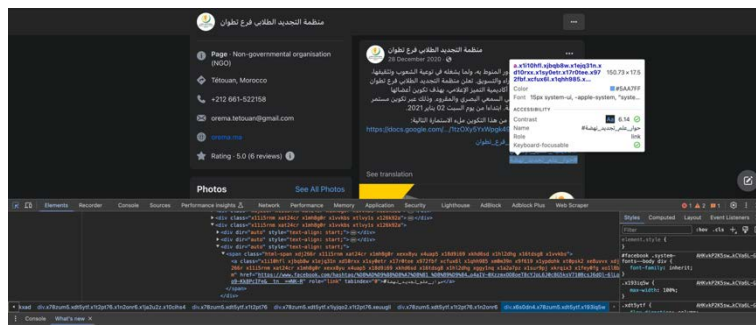


Fig. 5 Inspection of the OREMA's Facebook page. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci, December 2020. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

In Facebook's HTML structure, comments are classified under “div” selectors, which serve as generic containers for content, and further categorized under “class” attributes, which

¹²¹ Automated web scraping involves extracting data from websites using software applications that run automated tasks, while web inspection implies websites manual examination. Facebook's stricter privacy policies, including the prohibition of automated web scraping, were enforced more rigorously after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The scandal involved unauthorized use of Facebook user data to influence political campaigns, namely the 2016 presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Brexit Referendum. See Rosenberg, Matthew, Nicholas Confessore, and Carole Cadwalladr, “How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions”, The New York Times, March 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>.

¹²² Note that the HTML document includes only the content manually viewed while scrolling through the page; any parts not manually visualized are not present. To determine the languages of posts and comments on Islam-oriented Facebook pages, manually scrolling through all posts produced over 3 to 4 years would have taken too much time. Therefore, I selected 3 posts per month and inspected their comments.

define specific characteristics of these containers¹²³. To locate and extract comments I used Python’s parsing library BeautifulSoup (BS). BS takes input data, such as the comments’ text values, and converts it into a structured format, namely the actual text of the comment. In other words, the library can identify the desired content (i.e., the comments) within a text that encompasses millions of symbols (i.e., the HTML document). It then removes unwanted elements and presents only the desired information in a readable format. Here is an example of the script¹²⁴:

```
soup = BeautifulSoup(open("orematetouan.htm"), "html.parser")

comments = soup.find_all('div', {
    'class': [
        'rq0escxv', 'l9j0dhe7', 'du4w351b',
        'hybvs6c', 'ue3kfk5', 'pw54ja7n',
        'uo3d90p7', 'l82x9zwi', 'ni8dbm04',
        'stjgntxs', 'k4urcfbm', 'sbcfpzgs']})

for comment in comments:
    print(comment.get_text())
```

The outcome is a TXT document (fig. 6) containing comments extracted from the scraped section of the Facebook page. These comments, now in TXT format, are ready for the next phase of analysis, which involves language detection using NLP libraries.



Fig. 6 Result of the BS parsing using Python, November 2020. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Eleonora Landucci.

¹²³ The complexity of the analysis lies in the dynamic nature of the text values, which change with every page refresh—a security measure implemented by Facebook in response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

¹²⁴ The first line of the script specifies that whenever I mention the variable “soup”, Python should open the HTML document named “orematetouan.htm” using BS with its integrated “html.parser” to parse HTML doctype. In the second line, I instruct BS to locate all content identified as “div” that includes a “class” with the text value “rq0escxv...” at some point. Finally, I execute the function by requesting Python to provide all the data corresponding to the variable “comments” and extract only the text from this variable.

To identify the languages used in these comments, their frequency, and the specific characters employed, I used several NLP libraries. In the following example, I use the automatic language identifier TextCat to determine the language usage in lines 0 to 16 of the TXT document shown in fig. 6¹²⁵:

```
In:
tc = TextCat()

commentsData = pd.read_csv('2020_11_06_comments.txt')

commentsData['comment'][0:16].apply(tc.guess_language)

print(commentData)

Out:
1          ar
2          ar
3          ar
4          ar
5         UNK
6          ar
7          ar
8          ar
9          ar
10         ar
11         ar
12         ar
13         UNK
14         ar
15         ar
16         ar
```

The result is a numerical table that can be exported to Excel and used in data visualization programs for its graphical representation¹²⁶. As shown in the output (“Out”) section of this example, TextCat successfully identified Arabic in all comments except for lines 5 and 13. These comments are written in Moroccan Arabic using Latin characters, leading the software to classify them as “unknown” (abbreviated as “UNK”). Manual verification of the

¹²⁵ The first line of the script in the Input (“In”) whenever I mention the variable “tc”, Python should open TextCat library. The second line states that whenever the variable “commentData” is mentioned, Python should use another NLP library called pandas (abbreviated as “pd” in the script) to open the TXT file named “2020_11_06_comments.txt”. Pandas is commonly used for analyzing and producing numerical tables. In the third and fourth lines, the function is executed, requesting TextCat to determine the language of comments ranging from 0 to 16 using “tc.guess_language” in the script.

¹²⁶ Python provides libraries for data visualization, but for the graphical representation of the quantitative findings in this thesis, I used the Flourish website.

UNK values is necessary, but inspecting a limited number of comments is far more manageable than reviewing thousands. NLP's automatic language identifiers have limitations, particularly with very short texts and non-official or non-standardized languages written in alphanumeric characters, such as Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight. Although the software may struggle to accurately recognize these languages, web scraping remains more efficient and less prone to errors compared to manual data extraction and collection, especially when dealing with large volumes of data.

Despite restrictions imposed by Facebook, Python allowed me to automate complex data collection and analysis processes thanks to its numerous ready-to-use libraries and intuitive syntax. This made it the preferred tool for NEThnography over other quantitative methods for social media analytics, and, in general, one of the most widely used tools in digital anthropology and DH. However, it is important to acknowledge the drawbacks of Python-based social media analytics. These methods risk reducing complexity of human interactions online and might limit the interpretation and depth of ethnographic analysis. Moreover, they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of online interactions, especially from the users' perspective. As part of the NEThnographic multimodal and multidisciplinary toolbox, social media analytics served as a tool for automating certain processes, but ethnographic qualitative research remains essential.

Part 1 establishes the interrelation of the epistemological, ethical, and methodological frameworks of my ethnographic research conducted within an Islam-oriented group in Morocco. It begins by laying out the epistemological foundations of the research, which was conducted during times of precarity and involving feelings of vulnerability for both the researcher and the interlocutors. Then, it introduces the concept of assemblage reflexivity, which reflects on the positioning of the researcher and interlocutors and addresses ethical considerations in both online and offline ethnographic fieldwork. Finally, it presents the NEThnography methodology, designed to tackle the challenges of conducting ethnography in a hybrid online-offline environment. Part 2 will delve into the findings of the research. From historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives, I will explore how power structuring contemporary Morocco have been constructed around, and shaped by, three pillars: the dynamics of language policies, politics, and ideologies, the intertwining of political and religious authority vested in the monarchy, and the various spaces of mediation where this power is negotiated.

PART 2

BEYOND THE MOROCCAN EXCEPTION POWER IN ITS LANGUAGES, IDENTITIES, AND SPACES OF MEDIATION



*Cov. 3 The electoral campaign for the general elections in Morocco, one year after the COVID pandemic.
Photo by Eleonora Landucci (Rabat, September 6, 2021).*

*The king is good,
the government is bad.*
(Moroccan saying)

Morocco is often described as an “exception”, a term used to emphasize a presumed singularity that has defined the country throughout its history (Saint-Prot and Rouillois 2013). Unlike much of the Maghreb, Morocco was never conquered by the Ottoman Empire during its expansion into the region between the 16th and 17th centuries (Saghi 2012). Furthermore, Morocco’s political regime remained intact during the Arab Spring’s uprisings and revolutions of 2010 that swept through the Maghreb and the broader Middle East (Badran 2019). In addition, Morocco stands out as the only monarchy in the region, distinguished by its unique model of centralized political and religious authority vested in the king, who is constitutionally recognized as the “Commander of the Faithful” (*amīr al-mu’minīn*)¹²⁷. This perceived exceptionalism has evolved into a dominant narrative, both within Morocco and on the international stage, portraying the country as the “model student” of the region when compared to its neighbors¹²⁸.

However, this rhetoric gains greater significance when understood as an expression of a power narrative, which serves to define and legitimize specific dynamics on both micro and macro levels. Therefore, if this narrative is analyzed through the prism of power construction, it uncovers fundamental historical, sociological, and political processes that are essential for understanding the dynamics underlying the formation of the modern Moroccan state. This approach offers a critical tool for examining power, identity, and social practices in contemporary Morocco, enabling a proper contextualization of the *milieu* in which Islam-

¹²⁷ The role of the Commander of the Faithful in shaping the modern Moroccan state is explored in chapter 5.

¹²⁸ The press often depicts Morocco’s foreign policy as a “disciplined”, aligning with the expectations of major international powers, particularly France, Spain, and the United States. See Mehdi Lahlou, “La politique migratoire marocaine, un exemple à suivre?”. *Orient XXI*, December 22, 2022 <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/la-politique-migratoire-marocaine-un-exemple-a-suivre,1689>

oriented social actors, central to this research, operate. Thus, I propose moving beyond the rhetorical (self)narration of the “Moroccan exception” to critically examine the mechanisms through which power is articulated. This requires analyzing three key dimensions: how this narrative is voiced (languages), who has the authority to narrate it (identities), and the spaces from which it is narrated (spaces of mediation). The complex interplay between these dimensions—languages, identities, and spaces of mediation—constitutes a defining feature of the power dynamics that characterize the Moroccan context.

These dynamics have driven the tension between homogenizing trends (concerning language, culture, religion) and its profoundly heterogeneous socio-cultural reality, shaping the key phases of Moroccan history: the colonization (1912-1956), nation-building (1956-1999), and the era of liberalization and democratization (1999-present). To understand Morocco’s power construction, I will explore the following questions: Why and how language in Morocco served as the same socio-political tool employed paradoxically by opposing authorities to advance often conflicting policies and ideologies? How the construction of Moroccan national identity—shaped through cultural assimilation on the one hand, and concessions over heterogeneous ethnolinguistic heritages on the other—contributed to the construction and consolidation of power in Morocco? How power in Morocco is constructed and disseminated through specific spaces of mediation, and how have these spaces evolved, particularly with the advent of the digital age?

To explore these issues, I conducted an extensive historical and sociological investigation into Morocco’s linguistic landscape and its language-related policies and ideologies. Additionally, I examined the construction of Morocco’s national identity through key markers such as religion, the monarchy, and territory to understand their roles in the nation-building process. Finally, I analyzed Morocco’s mainstream and digital media, focusing on how these spaces of mediation have shaped the Moroccan public sphere before and after the digital age. My analysis draws on indirect sources produced by sociolinguists, historians, and anthropologists, addressing topics related to language, identity, and public space in the Arab and Muslim world. I also examined primary sources in Arabic, French, and Spanish from the era of the Spanish and French protectorates, particularly from 1912 to 1936. This approach allowed me to explore the interactions between colonial powers, the Moroccan central government under the sultan, and nationalist movements¹²⁹.

¹²⁹ While my study spans a broad timeframe, from the Amazigh presence before the Umayyad conquest of the 7th century CE to contemporary times, my primary focus is on the period from the protectorate to post-independence. This century-long period witnessed some of the most significant moments in the construction and deconstruction of power and identity in Morocco.

The second part of the thesis aims to understand Morocco's specific historical, social, and cultural dynamics to contextualize the emergence and development of the Islam-oriented groups that are the focus of my research¹³⁰. As outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, these groups represent the spectrum within which Islam as a normative framework is constructed in Morocco. This spectrum includes the “monarchical stance” of the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq, the “Islamist reformist” approach of the student group OREMA, and the “secular” and “globalized” Islamic community engagement of the NGO Al-Amal¹³¹. I argue that these social actors construct their legitimacy by navigating the constant tension between homogenizing and assimilative politics and Morocco's profoundly heterogeneous socio-cultural reality. To fully understand this process, it is essential to examine how Arabization has been central to forging national identity, how the king holds both political and religious authority, and how the public sphere is constructed through spaces of mediation monitored by institutional power.

Therefore, this second part is divided into three chapters. In chapter 4, I emphasize the importance of understanding Morocco's linguistic diversity and its impact on the sociopolitical context. I will explore the historical evolution of language and examine the role of language policies and ideologies in shaping the modern state. In chapter 5, I focus on the three pillars of the national motto to analyze the formation of post-independence national identity. I will demonstrate how Morocco's imagined community centers around the figure of the sultan, who becomes the king of the nation-state. This is reinforced, on the one hand, by the constitutional alignment of Maliki Islam as the state religion, which helps counter political opposition based on other Islamic doctrines during the post-independence period. On the other hand, territorial unity functions as an identity-building element, strengthening the monarchy's political project. In chapter 6, I will examine the history of media in Morocco—both before and after the digital age—and its role in creating a monitored public sphere. Although the advent of the Internet has not brought democratization, it has significantly changed the nature of political action and communication both for the monarchical project and various counter-projects.

¹³⁰ For an analysis of the term “Islam-oriented” and the rationale behind this choice, see Introduction, III.

¹³¹ For a detailed description of the groups, see Introduction, III.

LANGUAGES IN MOROCCO: A STORY OF POWER



Fig. 7 Inscriptions in multiple languages (Arabic, French, and Tamazight) at the south entrance of the Faculty of Sciences, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University of Tétouan, May 2022. Photo by Eleonora Landucci. © Eleonora Landucci.

In linguistics, the term “diglossia”, coined by linguist Charles Ferguson, refers to the coexistence of different language varieties within a single community. In his influential article, Ferguson distinguishes between a prestigious high variety, used formally, and a low variety, employed informally (Ferguson 1959, 345). He illustrates his thesis with various examples, notably from Arabic language, highlighting the coexistence of two varieties: one associated with the Quran and a rich literary tradition, and another, less standardized, used in everyday conversation. This definition gained traction in Arabic linguistics, fitting the hierarchy of Modern Standard Arabic as high variety and local dialects as low varieties. However, Ferguson’s concept faced significant criticism for not considering the intricate interplay between language, society, and culture. The diglossic paradigm essentially functions as a linguistic ideology: it relies on shared cultural beliefs, primarily Western-centered, that influence language usage without exploring the complexity of language and speech as cultural

phenomena (Brustad 2017; Sayahi 2014; Bassiouney 2009; Caubet 2003; Fishman 1968; Suleiman 2013; Mejdell 2011).

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between language as both a human resource and a historical product and process, emphasizing how language not only reflects but also shapes social order (Duranti 1997; Him-Aquilli and Telep 2021). Sociolinguist Reem Bassiouney stresses the need to move beyond simplistic notions such as “standardized” and “colloquial”, “low” and “high”, and to instead examine the historical and socio-cultural dynamics that influence language evolution (Bassiouney 2009). In this sense, it is essential to broaden the analysis beyond language itself to include all the tools individuals use to convey meaning, each requiring its own learning and adaptation process (Blommaert 2010; Vertovec 2007). Drawing from these theories, I advocate for a comprehensive approach that adapts the study of human communication to a world shaped by transnational mobility and technological influence. In such context, traditional “presuppositions of stability in social, cultural, and linguistic formations can no longer be considered valid” (Blommaert and Spotti 2016, 11). Thus, the concept of diglossia can no longer accurately describe this complex reality.

Drawing upon this body of literature, I argue that instead of enforcing rigid categorizations that fail to capture the complexities of linguistic phenomena, we should focus on the historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts that shape them. In this regard, Morocco’s complex linguistic history has significantly influenced the construction of the modern state, with language policies and ideologies playing crucial roles. At the same time, these policies and ideologies have reinforced political counter-power that can potentially challenge the state’s legitimacy. Therefore, I approach the connection between language and power by examining the implementation of language policies and ideologies from the colonial period to the post-independence (subchapter 4.2 and 4.3). Before delving into this, I will briefly outline Morocco’s intricate linguistic landscape to accurately contextualize its sociolinguistic diversity (subchapter 4.1).

4.1 Morocco’s Linguistic Landscape

The North African region, spanning from the southern Mediterranean to the Sahara Desert and from Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean, shares a common linguistic history in which Morocco plays an integral part. Located in the extreme west of North Africa, Morocco, along with present-day Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania, was conquered by the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th century CE. The primary objective of these conquerors was to

unify the region under a single language and religion: Arabic and Islam. Before the Umayyad arrival, these territories were inhabited by populations speaking various linguistic varieties from the Afro-Asiatic language family (Kossmann 2020; Greenberg 1963). During earlier periods of colonization by the Greeks and Romans, individuals who spoke these languages were labeled as *barbaroi* in Greek, or *barbari* in Latin (“stutterers”) to describe those who did not speak Greek, and later, Latin (Lafkioui and Brugnatelli 2008). This designation persisted through Arab rule and was later translated as “Berbers” by the European colonizers to refer to the people who speak the “Berber languages” (Chaker 2003a; 2003b; 1989).

In the context of Morocco’s linguistic historiography, scholars do not universally agree on the term used to designate the speakers of languages present before the Umayyad era (Maddy-Weitzman 2001). One widely used designation, *imaḥiyyen* (sing. *amaḥiyy*), meaning “freemen” in the Tuareg language (Ibid. 2008), has been enthusiastically embraced by many communities across North Africa. This adoption coincided with a resurgence of awareness of their linguistic and cultural uniqueness, which began gaining momentum in the late 1980s. The use of “Amazigh” for describing the people and “Tamazight” for their language has gained official recognition in Morocco. The Constitution of 2011 enshrined these terms into the nation’s legal framework. The Tamazight languages, standardized into three main variants—Tamazight (central Morocco), Tarifiyt (northern Morocco), and Tashelhiyt (southern Morocco)—are spoken by 27% of the population (Haut-commissariat au Plan 2014).

Following the Arab conquest, Arabic became and remains the predominant language in Morocco. Today Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is spoken by 99.4 % of the population (Haut-commissariat au Plan 2014) and is used for written communication and formal settings like diplomacy, international relations, economy, and politics. Moroccan Arabic (MA), or *Darija*, is the main spoken language, used informally by 89.8% of the population (Haut-commissariat au Plan 2014)¹³². Although MSA and Tamazight are official, MA is widely used in daily communication, television, cinema, and advertising (Dakhliya 2004). In the last decade, political figures increasingly deliver public speeches in MA (Caubet and Miller 2016). MA is a dynamic language with regional variations, influenced by a Tamazight substratum and significant borrowings from French and Spanish (fig. 8).

¹³² These percentages come from the Haut-commissariat au Plan, the official authority responsible for conducting economic, demographic, and social censuses in Morocco. However, Amazigh movements have criticized these results, questioning the census methods and the survey questions. The most recent census was in 2014, with the next one scheduled for 2024 (Haut-commissariat au Plan 2014).



Fig. 8 Languages in Morocco according to data from the Higher Planning Commission. Chart by Nagihuin. © CC0.

The influence of these European languages in Moroccan Arabic began in the late 19th century during Spanish colonization and intensified in the early 20th century with the French colonization. French and Spanish colonial rule in Morocco lasted for about half a century, with Spain governing the northern regions and the Sahara, and France overseeing the rest of the country. During this period, colonial authorities introduced reforms to establish the colonizers’ languages as official in the country. This effort was particularly strong under the French protectorate, where the educational system promoted French as the medium of instruction (Alalou 2018). Today, French and Spanish remain optional subjects in primary and higher education, and cultural, economic, and political ties between Morocco and these two European countries are still strong (Ennaji 2005; Soulaïmani 2019; Lafkioui 2013). Consequently, French and Spanish have become widely integrated into Morocco’s linguistic landscape¹³³.

The diverse linguistic landscape in Morocco, where various languages coexist within the same population, has profoundly shaped the nation’s social, cultural, economic, and political landscape. While Morocco has its unique characteristics, this sociolinguistic complexity is common across the 23 states of the world where MSA holds official or co-official status. From Morocco to Sudan, and from Mauritania to Yemen, the coexistence of MSA with regional

¹³³ For a chart of spoken, read, and written languages in Morocco, categorized by residence and gender, see Appendix 4.

languages and dialects creates a dynamic linguistic environment. Sociolinguist Reem Bassiouney notes that studying language in society and the unequal distribution of linguistic resources highlights how patterns of linguistic variation reflect and accentuate social differences (Bassiouney 2009, 5). The following subchapter traces the intricate history of language policies and ideologies to reveal how national identity has been constructed, reappropriated, and contested in Morocco.

4.2 Language Policies: Homogenizing and Transforming Trends

Morocco's linguistic history is a complex tapestry that resists simple categorization. Understanding this complexity requires exploring the series of ideas and strategies regarding language implemented in Morocco up to the 2011 Constitution. The collective ideological perspectives on a specific linguistic context, agreed upon by a community, can be defined as "language policy"; conversely, the term "language planning" involves implementing these ideological views into practical plans and strategies (Wright 2016; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2000; Hassa 2012). Some scholars prefer the term "language management" to capture the ongoing, multifaceted nature of this process, which includes various strategies rather than rigid plans (Wright 2016; Nekvapil quoted in Spolsky 2012).

These definitions emphasize that the concept of language policy extends beyond linguistics. It operates within a broader context, deeply influenced by non-linguistic factors such as politics, demographics, religion, and culture. According to linguist Bernard Spolsky, language policy has four fundamental characteristics: it comprises language practices, beliefs, and ideologies aimed at modifying community practices and ideologies; it establishes acceptable language uses and delineates norms for inappropriate usage; it is often implemented within specific speech communities; and it is shaped by those in authority, including states and other religious, social, or political entities (Spolsky 2004).

In this sense, language policy is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that standardizes a set of linguistic and non-linguistic beliefs, practices, and principles into juridical norms, which are directed at specific social groups (Wright 2016). This is especially evident in the Arab world, where language policies have evolved within "an ever-evolving relation between language, ideology, nation, and state" (Bassiouney 2009, 199). Therefore, understanding the intricate web of language policies in Morocco requires integrating the country's linguistic history with the diverse ideas and strategies that have shaped its socio-cultural context.

The development of language policies in Morocco is deeply intertwined with its history of conquests, which have profoundly shaped the region's linguistic and cultural landscape. Beginning with the Arab conquest in the 8th century CE, the spread of Islam—and consequently the language of the Quran—gradually marginalized Amazigh languages. This early phase laid the groundwork for the Arabization of the region, albeit through a process that unfolded over centuries. During the colonial period, from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries, language policies took on a different role. Colonial powers, particularly France, strategically exploited ethnolinguistic divisions as tools of control. These policies deepened language and ethnic-based segregation and reinforced colonial hierarchies. Following Morocco's independence in 1956, the state implemented Arabization policies aimed at unifying the nation under a common linguistic and cultural identity. These efforts sought to solidify the nation-state by promoting Arabic as the primary language, often at the expense of Amazigh languages. At the core of these historical trajectories lies a recurring theme of linguistic homogenization as a means of territorial and population control (Vignet-Zunz 1982). Early scholarship on the linguistic history of the Maghreb often justified this assumption, with many historians and linguists arguing that the region achieved linguistic, political, and cultural unity only after the Arab conquest in 647 CE (Biarnay 1917; Basset 1883; Harris 1898).

These assumptions have been challenged by historical and sociolinguistic research on the Maghreb, which demonstrates that the region already had a rich and complex cultural and political landscape during the period of Amazigh predominance, dating back to before 215 BCE (Lafkioui and Brugnatelli 2008). Nevertheless, the Arabo-Islamic expansion of the 8th century CE brought about a profound linguistic transformation in the Maghreb¹³⁴. Classical Arabic emerged not only as the language of administration and political authority but also as the principal medium for conveying the religious message of Islam, thereby solidifying its role as both a linguistic and cultural force in the region. In this context, Arabization can be viewed as a process intrinsically linked to the Islamization of the Maghreb, functioning as a key instrument for facilitating the spread of Islam among the local population. The Islamization of the Amazigh tribes in Morocco occurred gradually and expanded around 711 CE when the Muslim army, led by Tariq Ibn Ziyad, an Amazigh convert to Islam, invaded Spain.

Between the 11th and 12th century CE, independent dynasties ruled the region, claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Notably, several of the most influential dynasties, such

¹³⁴ Linguists Mena Lafkioui and Vermondo Brugnatelli have shown that, while the Greek, Roman, Vandal, and Byzantine rulers achieved political unification, they did not exercise power through linguistic dominance (Lafkioui and Brugnatelli 2008).

as the Almoravids and Almohads, were Amazigh-led converted to Islam (Sayahi 2014; Lafkioui and Brugnattelli 2008; Aguadé, Cressier, and Vicente 1998). Historians Pascal Buresi and Mehdi Ghouirgate emphasize that Islamization advanced more rapidly than Arabization, as Arab influence was initially concentrated in the religious sphere. The process of Arabization, though slower, gained momentum during the Almoravid period, a critical juncture that also saw the consolidation of a political ideology grounded in Malikism (Buresi and Ghouirgate 2021)¹³⁵. A key event occurred in 1073 when the Almoravid prince adopted the title *amīr al-muslimīn* (“Commander of the Muslims”), modeled after the title *amīr al-mu’minīn* (“Commander of the Faithful”), first introduced by Caliph ‘Umar, the Prophet Muhammad’s successor (Ibid. 2021, 38). The development of Malikism in Morocco, followed by the emergence of Sharifism in the 14th century—a system that conferred religious and political authority upon the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad¹³⁶—played a pivotal role in shaping a distinctive power structure within the Maghreb. This framework was further solidified under successive Moroccan dynasties, culminating in the establishment of the current Alawi dynasty (1631–present).

Centuries later, during the French and Spanish colonization of Morocco from 1860 to 1956, homogenizing language policies played a crucial role in enforcing colonial control through administrative and educational reforms¹³⁷. Language policies in the French and Spanish protectorates differed notably. France aimed to separate the Arab-speaking and Tamazight-speaking populations using a *divide et impera* (divide and conquer) strategy and promoted French to assimilate the Moroccan elite into colonial administration¹³⁸. In contrast, Spanish protectorate relied on dividing the population based on religious characteristics (Vermeren 2011; Hoffman 2010). Following Morocco’s independence in 1956, two conflicting social and educational paradigms emerged. One was driven by intellectuals advocating for the religious legitimacy of Islam and Arabic, while the other was led by elites aiming to modernize the nation post-French colonial era. These paradigms converged in forming various political parties, with members ranging from nationalists to those with traditionalist backgrounds (Eickelman 1985). During this period, the sultan-turned-king used homogenizing educational

¹³⁵ The Maliki Sunni school of Islam, one of the four main Sunni legal schools, is prevalent in North and West Africa. In Morocco, it plays a crucial role in shaping both the religious and legal frameworks, with the ‘Alawi monarchy aligning itself with this tradition to reinforce its religious legitimacy and political authority.

¹³⁶ “Sharifism” refers to the concept and social practice centered around the reverence for individuals or families who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, known as *shurfā’* (sing., *sharīf*, meaning “highborn”). This attributed sacred inviolability and sovereignty to these descendants considered as holy figures (Cornell 1998).

¹³⁷ This period significantly impacted political and identity issues, especially with the rise of nationalist movements claiming independence, see 4.3, 5.1, and 5.2.

¹³⁸ For further analysis on ethno-linguistic segregation during the protectorate period, see 4.3.1.

reforms, based on four principles—generalization, unification, nationalization, and Arabization—to control the political tendencies in the country (Gandolfi 2011; Alalou 2018)¹³⁹. Homogenizing trends extended beyond language policies: as sociolinguist and dialectologist Montserrat Benítez Fernández has shown, Arabization permeated all spheres of public life, including education, administration, justice, business, and politics, serving as a foundational tool for the post-colonial nation-building process (Benítez Fernández 2006).

Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the transition from King Hassan II to King Mohammed VI, the homogenizing tendencies of linguistic policies shifted towards more transformative trends (Vermeren 2012). In the late 1990s, as king Mohammed VI succeeded the late king Hassan II, Arabization policies slowed down. This shift aimed to curb radical Islamism and responded to the Amazigh movements advocating for the recognition of Tamazight (Maddy-Weitzman 2006). Notably, the creation of the IRCAM (“Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture”) in 2001 marked the fostering of Amazigh culture and language research. The institute’s primary mission was to standardize the Tamazight alphabet and grammar, and subsequently create textbooks and media content to promote the Amazigh language and culture (Soulaimani 2019; 2016b). Starting from 2003, Tamazight is incorporated as teaching language in schools, and the 2011 Constitution further elevated Amazigh’s status by recognizing Tamazight as official alongside MSA (Pouessel 2013; 2008).

However, challenges persist in teaching the Amazigh language, and the “Amazigh issue” is often instrumentalized by both the Monarchy and opposing political parties (Errihani 2008). In February 2016, Morocco abandoned the 30-year Arabization policy, and King Mohammed VI announced the reintroduction of French as the medium of instruction in public schools, with a fifteen-year implementation plan (Alalou 2018). Therefore, even though assimilative language policies have been abandoned towards more transformative tendencies, numerous tensions concerning language policies and their related ideologies persist (Macías-Amoretti 2018). To fully understand the impact of these language policies, it is essential to consider the underlying language ideologies that shape them.

4.3 Language Ideologies: Colonial Roots and Nation-Building

Before exploring the ideological perspectives behind the implementation of language policies in Morocco, it is important to delve into the concept of “language ideology” to provide context for the approaches that examine Morocco’s language ideologies. Linguist Judith T.

¹³⁹ For further analysis of language ideologies during the nation-building process, see 4.3.2.

Irvine defines language ideology as “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, intertwined with their moral and political implications” (Irvine 1989, 255). In other words, language ideologies are not static systems but composed of individuals’ interpretations of their situation and of their consequent social actions (Gal 1989; Irvine and Gal 2002). This socio-cultural dimension of language ideologies extends beyond language itself, encompassing identity, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology, revealing how systems of value operate in daily life (Gal and Irvine 2019). Following this approach, I focus on the ideologies of languages (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998), examining the ideological aspects of linguistic matters and their connections to social dominance.

Sociolinguist James Milroy’s insights on language standardization ideologies are particularly relevant to Morocco’s language ideologies. Milroy suggests an ideology of the standard language, where certain languages are perceived as having standardized forms (Milroy 2001). This process begins with establishing uniformity in language structure through actions like codifying grammar rules and dictionaries for a standard variety and promoting it in public contexts. Consequently, the standard language gains legitimacy, while others are marginalized. This standardization and legitimization are driven not by the language’s inherent structures but by prevailing language ideologies¹⁴⁰. In Arabic-speaking contexts, Milroy’s theory shifts the focus from linguistic correctness to the moral and sacred significance linking Classical Arabic to the Quran, rendering any language other than Classical Arabic morally subordinate.

In Morocco, the moral dimension of the ideology of Arabic standardization had significant political implications, particularly during the French and Spanish protectorates and the nation-building process after Morocco’s independence. The 1930s marked a pivotal moment in Morocco’s colonial history. During this time, the nationalist movement solidified in urban centers, forming a religious, linguistic, and identity-based opposition rooted in the Arab-Islamic heritage in response to colonial discriminatory ethno-linguistic policies. Archival research conducted between 2021 and 2022 in Northern Morocco and France¹⁴¹, supported by existing literature (Sayahi 2015; Wyrzten 2011), confirms that Spanish and French divergent language policies led to different nationalist responses.

¹⁴⁰ When examining Ferguson’s categorization of high and low language, it becomes evident that diglossia itself can be viewed as an outcome of language ideologies (Brustad 2017).

¹⁴¹ Archives of the *Biblioteca Daoudia* in Tétouan, archives of the *Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l’Homme* in Aix-en-Provence, archives of the French National Library in Paris.

4.3.1 Colonial Strategies of Ethno-Linguistic Segregation

Spain's strategy for control was based on creating ethnic and religious divisions: "Spanish schools" for Christian Spaniards (*escuelas españolas*), "Hispanic-Israelite" schools (*escuelas hispano-israelitas*) for the Sephardic Jews, and "Hispanic-Muslim" schools (*hispano-musulmanas*) for Muslim Moroccans. The limited use of Spanish in the latter two schools, highlights Spain's focus on ethnic and religious divisions for control rather than language. In contrast, the French colonial power used language policies to control the Moroccan population by segregating Arabic-speaking and Amazigh-speaking communities based on ethnic, linguistic, and administrative criteria. This approach finds its key example in the Berber Dahir of 1930. The decree placed Amazigh tribes under French jurisdiction rather than the sultan, preserving their customary laws instead of enforcing Sharia¹⁴². This separation aimed to prevent the Islamization and Arabization of the Amazigh while using the French language to educate an elite class that would later be assimilated into the colonial administration (Hoffman 2010; Zisenwine 2010).

The formalization of French colonial ethno-linguistic ideologies into policy sparked major nationalist demonstrations in Morocco (Wyrzten 2015). Following the Dahir's promulgation, rallies and demonstrations emerged, notably marked by the dissemination of a modified version of the *laṭīf* prayer¹⁴³, reciting "Oh God, the Benevolent, do not separate us from our Berber brothers" (Wyrzten 2013). As shown by this example, nationalist activists aimed to challenge the French-imposed Arab-Berber dichotomy by defining Amazigh as Arabized Muslims; however, they primarily celebrated the Arab cultural and linguistic aspects, as the French had used Amazigh identity and culture to divide and control.

In the Spanish protectorate, the urban nationalist movement followed a different trajectory (Aixelà-Cabré 2019). Unlike the rural resistance in the Atlas and the Rif mountains, which faced consistent repression from the Spanish authorities¹⁴⁴, urban nationalists were more tolerated compared to those in the French protectorate (Aixelà-Cabré 2015). Until at least

¹⁴² For further details, see *Dahir du 16 mai 1930 (17 hija 134) réglant le fonctionnement de la justice dans les tribus de coutume berbère non pourvues de mahakemas pour l'application du Chraâ 1930*.

¹⁴³ *Al-wird al-laṭīf* was composed by the Yemeni Islamic scholar 'Aballah bn 'Alawi al-Haddad (1634-1720) from the prayers of Muhammad, and it is used for protection from various inward and outward perils.

¹⁴⁴ The rural resistance to Spanish colonization led to the Rif War (1921-1926), during which Rif fighters inflicted severe defeats on Spanish troops, culminating in the declaration of the independent Republic of the Rif in 1923. Following these setbacks, Spain sought assistance from France and together they ultimately defeated the rebel forces. Despite this defeat, the Rif War was a powerful demonstration of anti-colonial resistance and left a lasting mark on Moroccan collective memory. For a brief overview of the Republic of the Rif and its founder Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi, see footnote 187.

1934, the northern urban nationalists pursued a peaceful path toward administrative reform of the protectorate rather than seeking full independence (Hart 1999). In this context, the issue of Moroccan Arab-Islamic ethno-linguistic identity was not a primary driver of nationalist claims, rather focused on establishing a broader pan-Arab cultural movement. This was because Spanish colonial policies initially focused on maintaining ethno-religious segregation rather than systematically suppressing Arab-Islamic identity (Mateo Dieste 2003)¹⁴⁵.

4.3.2 *Language and Nation-Building: The Case of Al-Salam*

The relatively permissive environment of the early Spanish protectorate allowed northern nationalists to initiate cultural and educational initiatives, most notably the publication of Arabic magazines¹⁴⁶. These initiatives significantly influenced the nascent nationalist movement and contributed to the expansion of Morocco's Arabic printing. A prominent example is the cultural magazine *Al-Salam* ("The Peace"). Founded in 1933 in Tétouan by nationalist Mohammed Daoud, *Al-Salam* was inspired by *Al-Islah* ("The Reform"), another Tétouani printing press and cultural magazine founded in 1917 by the prominent nationalist Abdesalam Bennuna (1888-1935)¹⁴⁷. Building upon *Al-Islah*, *Al-Salam* attracted interest with its reflections on how Morocco's modernization process should unfold while preserving its traditional Islamic identity (*Al-Salam* 1933).

Al-Salam emerged during a period of relative understanding between nationalists and the Spanish protectorate. In an article by Mohammed Daoud published in the colonial magazine *África. Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, the Moroccan nationalist expressed high hope for Moroccans in benefiting from the modernizing measures of the colonial regime (Daoud 1928). This ambivalent relationship is highlighted in a letter from Rico Avello, the High Commissioner of Spain in Morocco, addressed to *Al-Salam* (fig. 9), where he praises the quality of the magazine's content and hopes that the "indigenous people will walk with fraternal arm next to the Hispanic people for the elevation and the well-being of men" (*Al-Salam* 1934). However,

¹⁴⁵ This can be explained by Spain's unstable political situation between 1923 and 1939, which was marked by dictatorship, republic, and civil war, leading to frequent changes in colonial policies. Until Francisco Franco established his dictatorship in 1936, the protectorate tried to co-opt prominent nationalist figures.

¹⁴⁶ The nationalist Arabic press in Morocco became a key medium for conveying independence sentiments, especially in the French protectorate with figures like Mohamed Hassan Ouazzani and Allal El Fassi. However, before the French protectorate's nationalist movement became the leading rebellion, the Northern nationalist press played a crucial role as one of the earliest legitimate channels for communication with the growing pan-Arabist movements in the Maghreb and the Near and Middle East (Velasco de Castro 2021).

¹⁴⁷ *Al-Islah* marked the inception of the first nationalist publication in the Arabic language within Spanish Morocco (Velasco de Castro 2021).

restrictive measures by the Spanish authorities soon posed significant setbacks for nationalist aspirations. Shortly after *Al-Salam's* establishment, the Spanish protectorate required a translator with the authority to alter or censor its content. Ultimately, Daoud's magazine was banned within the French protectorate in 1934 and was forced to cease publication by the end of that year (*Al-Salam* 1934).

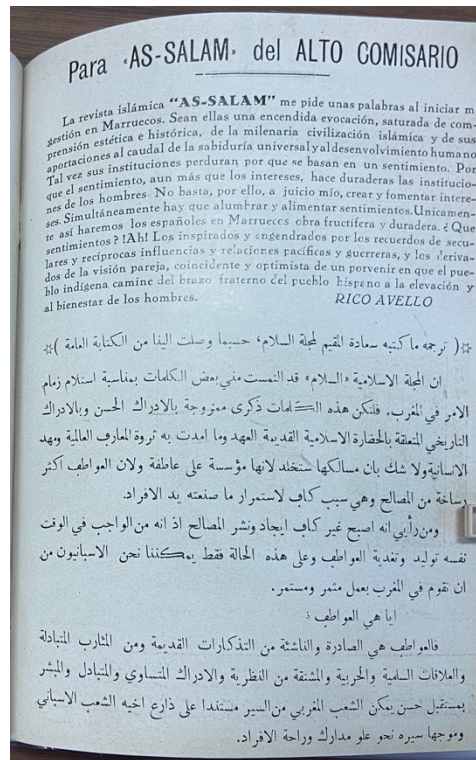


Fig. 9 Avello's letter transcribed and translated into Arabic in *Al-Salam*, VI, February 1934. Photo by Eleonora Landucci, May 2022. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Daoudia. © Eleonora Landucci

Research on *Al-Salam* magazine and the Arabic press reflects a complex relationship between language, identity, and the socio-cultural and political context during the pivotal period of the 1930s¹⁴⁸. The nationalist movement made significant efforts to challenge the dichotomies imposed by the colonial authorities, which categorized Moroccan society into binaries such as Arab versus Tamazight language and culture, and Islamic versus customary

¹⁴⁸ While nationalist newspapers and journals in Morocco offer valuable historical records, their reach was limited due to high illiteracy rates—94% for women and 90% for men during the interwar period (Ennaji 2005; Sadiqi 2007)—and strict colonial press control. Popular protests, such as those following the Berber Dahir, were more effective for mass mobilization and conveying nationalist messages in urban areas through strategic use of mosques, marches, boycotts, petitions, and strikes.

laws. However, attributes associated with Amazighness were often overlooked, concealed, or co-opted by nationalists who asserted that Arabic and Islam should be the primary identity markers (Tilmatine 2015). *Al-Salam's* stance towards the Spanish colonial authorities illustrates the ambivalent relationship between the nationalist movement and colonial power. While emphasizing Morocco's Arabo-Islamic history and national unity, nationalists, at least until the 1930s, sought to reform the colonial administration by advocating for the participation in the protectorate governance.

The ambivalent approach to language and identity significantly impacted Morocco's nation-building process after independence. After two decades of colonial rule, identity-related issues, including the creation of ethnic categories like "Arab" and "Berber", and the roles of language and religion in education and legal systems, became highly politicized. These disputes have since dominated Morocco's political struggles that continue to shape the nation today. As historian Jonathan Wyrzten states, "the colonial period in Morocco (1912–1956) established a new type of political field in which notions about and relationships among politics and identity formation were fundamentally transformed" (Wyrzten 2015, 5). In the following chapter, I will explore the multifaceted aspects of identity construction in Morocco. The interplay between language and nation-building during the colonial era has solidified into post-independence identity markers, such as the transformation of the Sultanate into a Monarchy and the establishment of cultural hegemony around the political use of religion.

“ALLAH, AL-WAṬAN, AL-MALIK”:

CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING NATIONAL IDENTITY



Fig. 10 Morocco's national motto engraved on the hillside of the kasbah in the city of Agadir (southern Morocco). Photo by Daniel*D. © CC BY-SA 3.0.

The phrase “*Allah, al-waṭan, al-malik*” (“God, the Nation, the King”), inscribed on public buildings and even in natural spaces throughout the country (fig. 10), has been Morocco’s national motto since its constitutional recognition in 1962, although it resonated with nationalist movements as early as the 1930s. As recounted by an *‘ālim* of the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq, Moroccan nationalists first encountered the slogan on the streets of Cairo, where it was chanted by Egyptian nationalists¹⁴⁹. Although this account lacks documented verification, it highlights that, in the Moroccan collective imaginary, the nation-building process began during the protectorate period with the struggles for decolonization. Despite

¹⁴⁹ This motto finds common usage in numerous countries in the world, and it became particularly well-known during the era of nation-state formation, between the 17th and 19th centuries.

the Monarchy's efforts to root *al-waṭan* in the Sharifian empire, Morocco's idea of nation and national identity does not stem from precolonial configurations. As demonstrated in subchapter 4.3, it emerges from the nationalist claim to an Arabo-Islamic heritage, which was used to challenge colonial policies based on ethno-linguistic separation.

It was during the struggle for independence that the construction of a collective Moroccan identity began to take shape. This identity was built on the principles of national unity and indivisibility, which, in turn, underscored the importance of a shared culture and language as fundamental pillars of the emerging nation-state. It is interesting to note that the construction of a national collective identity underwent by both contrasting *and* assimilating with the colonial project—especially the French one. This chapter explores the construction of national identity and its diverse dynamics of contention and reinforcement. I will consider the three pillars of the national motto as registers of legitimacy that have shaped the imagined community of the Moroccan nation from the colonial period to the present day. First, I show how Moroccan nationalism constructs a post-independence imagined community around the sultan-turned-king, who reappropriates this identity to consolidate power and co-opt political opponents (subchapter 5.1). Then, I examine the emergence of “Moroccan Islam” as a social and political project centered on the king as the Commander of the Faithful (subchapter 5.2). Despite having faced challenges from Sufi and Salafi-oriented counter-projects, this project has largely maintained its hegemony. Finally, I focus on the construction of a territorial identity centered on the idea of “reunification” and its forms of contestation, particularly those originating from the Amazigh movement (subchapter 5.3).

5.1 The Sultan Becomes King: Forging Morocco's Imagined Community

Political scientist Benedict Anderson's notion of “imagined community” (1983) stands as a cornerstone in the study of nationalism and modern nation-building. By delving into 19th-century European national imaginaries, Anderson argues that nations are not natural entities but constructs resulting from historical, cultural, and social processes. These imagined communities find cohesion through shared narratives involving common culture, language, religion, and history. This often entails standardizing language, education, and cultural practices, contributing to cultural homogenization. In this context, the rise of print media and mass communication has been crucial in disseminating this shared culture and fostering a sense of belonging among citizens. In other words, national imaginaries are rooted in a distinct

interpretation of time and space, conveyed through written media such as books and newspapers, which create the perception of an “imagined community” representing the nation.

Anderson’s analysis of nation-building begins with an examination of “classical Truth-languages” like Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic, which united large “religious communities” through shared narratives that transcended linguistic diversity (Anderson 1983, 12-15). Enlightenment and secularization challenged the dominance of these religious languages, shifting the power from divine to human agency. Textual media allowed language to transcend time and space, fostering the emergence of nations. This shift in the role of language in social and political organization was then exported to colonial territories, where colonial powers imposed monolingual ideologies. I argue that Moroccan nationalism successfully merged these two seemingly contradictory elements to create a unique national identity. The colonial concept of “one nation, one language, one state”, typical of secularized nations, was harmonized with the religious community of the Islamic *umma*¹⁵⁰, with the king as the Commander of the Faithful.

The consolidation of an Arabo-Islamic, monarchy-centered national identity was a direct outcome of the colonial system and anti-colonial resistance. Nationalists strategically used the figure of King Mohammed V and the Arabization process to incite public protests and build the post-independence state framework (Vermeren 2016; Suleiman 2003). They conveyed their vision of Moroccan national identity through mosque congregations, boycotts, petitions, and strikes in urban areas (Ouazzani 1932). Notably, nationalists confronted the ideological and symbolic authority of the colonial state by adopting and repurposing its symbols and rituals¹⁵¹, while also creating their own symbols of Moroccan unity. A clear example is the establishment of Throne Day (*‘aīd al-‘arsh*) in 1933 which marked the anniversary of the ascension of Mohammed ben Yousef (Mohammed V) to the throne on November 18, 1927. Although these decisions were primarily symbolic at the time, they provided the king with resources to mobilize Moroccans in the independence movement. During the 1940s, Throne Day speeches became an increasingly important platform for Mohammed V to directly communicate with the Moroccan people (Lafuente and Ilbert 1997).

By instituting Throne Day, the nationalists sought to modernize the image of the “Moroccan nation” and at the same time affirm their loyalty to the sultan, whom they began

¹⁵⁰ “*Umma*” refers to the global community of Muslims united by the Islamic faith. It embodies the concept of solidarity and brotherhood among all believers, regardless of ethnic, cultural, or linguistic differences. The *umma* is viewed as a single entity that shares common religious, ethical, and social values.

¹⁵¹ For instance, by officializing the colonial Sharifian flag as National flag. For further details, see *Dahir du 17 novembre 1915 (9 moharrem 1334) portant description du nouveau drapeau de l’Empire* 1915.

referring to as the king¹⁵². This title change is far from insignificant. Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef, initially a colonial figurehead chosen by the French protectorate in the 1920s, became Mohammed V¹⁵³. Nationalists leveraged him to legitimize their movement by emphasizing continuity between the Sultanate's past and the new independent nation-state. By elevating the figure of the sultan-turned-king, they aimed to align their movement with the 'Alawi dynasty (Rachik 2003). The nationalist movement initiated the transformation of Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef into an anti-colonial religious-political hero, known as the Commander of the Faithful (Zisenwine 2010).

Mohammed V skillfully leveraged both the colonial emphasis on his symbolic authority and the nationalists' efforts to incorporate these elements into the anti-colonial nation-building process. The Second World War provided a strategic opportunity for him to gain autonomy and power between these two opposing systems. When France declared war on Germany in 1939, the king positioned himself as a loyal protector of the French protectorate. However, with the establishment of Vichy rule in France, Mohammed V gradually asserted his independence. In 1942, he shifted the focus from reform to independence, encouraging the formation of the Nationalist Istiqlal Party¹⁵⁴ and the drafting of the independence manifesto (Delanoë 1991). During the negotiations for Morocco's independence, the French authorities began to view Mohammed V as an obstacle and demanded his abdication. When he refused, he was exiled to Madagascar to suppress the nationalist movement, of which he had become the symbolic leader. The king's exile fueled the struggle for independence, leading to increased violent protests across the country (Ibid. 1991). His return to Morocco in 1955 marked a significant step toward Morocco's independence, formally achieved in 1956.

After independence, Mohammed V embraced the nationalist project, embodying the traditional heritage of the Sharifian empire as sultan and the principles of political and economic modernization as king (Leveau 1985). This unique position allowed him to unify *al-waṭan* (the nation) with the figure of *al-malik* (the king). To consolidate his power, he capitalized on the cultural-religious dimension, as emphasized in his first post-independence speech on educational policy, highlighting "the spiritual principles of Islam and Arab culture" (Wyrzten 2015, 286). The strong response against the protectorate's ethnolinguistic ideology was

¹⁵² Mohammed ben Youssef (1909-1961) was the first Moroccan monarch to assume the title of "king" rather than "sultan", taking the name Mohammed V.

¹⁵³ Mohammed V was chosen by the French authorities over his two elder brothers, just as his father, Mulay Yusef, was selected by the French protectorate to replace his brother Mulay 'Abd al-Hafiz.

¹⁵⁴ Founded in 1944, the *ḥizb al-istiqlāl* ("the party of the independence" in Arabic) played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence from French colonial rule (Zisenwine 2010).

articulated in the Dahir of January 1, 1965. This policy established the pillars of “Moroccanization, Arabization, and Unification”, aiming to replace colonists in administrative infrastructures (Moroccanization), extend and modernize the use of Standard and Classical Arabic (Arabization), and standardize the education system under state control (Unification) (Benítez Fernández 2006).

Arabization, enshrined in Article 3 of the 1962 Constitution, designating Arabic as the national language, was more than a language shift, it aimed to construct Morocco’s imagined community and align with pan-Arabic countries¹⁵⁵. At the same time, while the official endorsement of Arabization was maintained, multilingualism remained a reality in many sectors¹⁵⁶, and French continued to be the language of the Moroccan elite. The gap between public rhetoric and social reality is evident in efforts to homogenize Moroccan society under a specific identity. The diverse cultural and historical of Amazigh, Hebrew, Sahrawi, and Andalusian Arab heritages was assimilated and marginalized during post-independence to solidify an Arab-Islamic identity aligned with the ‘Alawi monarchy and the Maliki Sunni school¹⁵⁷.

In the two decades following independence, amid political clashes to assert opposing visions for the newly established Moroccan state, the monarchy concentrated on securing its symbolic and material dominance (Waterbury 1970). King Hassan II, who succeeded Mohammed V in 1962, aimed to continue his father’s project while engaging with nationalist and progressive government factions. Simultaneously, he sought to maintain economic and social conservatism. On December 7, 1962, a referendum established Morocco as a constitutional monarchy, with Islam as the state religion and the king as the “Commander of the Faithful” (Article 19, later Article 41 in the 2011 Constitution), thereby reinforcing Hassan II’s authoritarian regime (Ibid. 1970). The Palace’s dominance over progressive projects was evident in the violent political repression from the early 1960s to the early 1990s, known as the “Years of Lead”. This period was marked by mass detentions, torture, and the disappearance

¹⁵⁵ The collaboration between institutions such as the *Institut d’Études et de Recherches pour l’Arabisation*, a fully Moroccan research center, and the *Bureau de Coordination sur l’Arabisation*, based in Rabat and funded by the Arab League, exemplifies the close ties between national and international efforts in advancing Arabization (Benítez Fernández 2006).

¹⁵⁶ Arabization was successfully implemented in sectors where substantial efforts were directed towards budgets and public policies. However, in areas like public administration, this transformation did not occur. Ministries such as Agriculture and Justice experienced a significant degree of Arabization, while Tourism remained bilingual, and some sectors, like the Economy, remained unaffected by the language reform (Gérard and Schlemmer 2003).

¹⁵⁷ For an overview of the naissance and development of Malikism in Morocco during the Almoravid reign, see subchapter 4.2.

of numerous citizens, particularly young students perceived as subversive (Vairel 2004). This period also saw the rise of Moroccan left-wing movements, particularly among students (Vermeren 2016; El Ayadi 1999).

During this period of severe repression, Arabization coincided with the Islamization of education. “Islamic Education” curricula were gradually integrated into schools and universities, while emphasis on humanities and social sciences diminished. Historian Mohammed El Ayadi noted that this move was intended to counter the influence of pan-Arabist, socialist, and communist opposition by implementing a rigorous Islamic education approach (El Ayadi 1999)¹⁵⁸. However, the rise of fundamentalist Islamism in Morocco cannot be solely attributed to the monarchy’s power dynamics. Scholars suggest this shift stems from internal struggles within an Arabized elite marginalized during post-independence nation-building by the Francophone elite (Munson 1993). Others argue it reflects failed modernization attempts in Muslim states post-independence (Mohamed Tozy 1999; Belal 2011; Darif 2010). Some view Islamism as a response to Western domination following the disillusionment with pan-Arabism, nationalism, and socialism. (Burgat 2016; 1995). Ultimately, Islam’s role in Morocco, as the state religion, extends beyond private spirituality; it is a key societal project embedded in the national motto (“*Allah*”) and a tool of governance. This project has been contested for decades, with the monarchy holding ultimate authority against various forces since the 1960s. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending Morocco’s societal projects related to Islam.

5.2 *Islam as a Societal Project*

During Nation-building, Arabic was officially recognized as the national language in the 1962 constitution; however, Arabization was often contingent on one’s social status. In contrast, Islam remained a fundamental, non-negotiable component of Moroccan identity (Wyrzten 2011). The constitutional role of the king as the Commander of the Faithful, overseeing both secular and Islamic matters, reinforced this position. This unique designation in the Maghreb region contributed to reinforce the idea of a distinct Moroccan form of Islam (Gellner 1969; Geertz 1971; Eickelman 1976). However, historian Edmund Burke III notes that “there was no discourse on Moroccan Islam before colonialism [...]. Rather, the discourse on Moroccan Islam was reinvented at each major turn of the wheel, as Morocco itself was

¹⁵⁸ In the late 1990s, as radical and fundamentalist Islamism began influencing public opinion in Morocco, the government reintroduced and strengthened curricula in social sciences and humanities (Gandolfi 2010).

remolded from 1900 onward” (Burke III 2014, 184). Understanding this historical construction reveals how various societal projects related to Islam emerged and clashed in Morocco, shaping different ideas of national identity.

5.2.1 *The Socio-Political Project of Moroccan Islam*

Burke has shown how the concept of “Moroccan Islam” has deep historical roots and significant implications for power and authority in the country. This idea was shaped by the French colonial administration’s need to simplify Morocco’s socio-cultural complexity into binary distinctions for ethnic-based legitimization. Between 1900 and 1920, colonial officers engaged French ethnographers to create a social inventory of Morocco, thus establishing the field of Moroccan Studies and the study of Moroccan Islam. This effort aimed to legitimize colonial authority and to establish continuity between pre-colonial and colonial Morocco. Drawing parallels with the French Third Republic, colonial administrators were keen on preserving the ‘Alawi Monarchy and its attributes of power, including Islam, for purposes of control (Ibid. 2014)¹⁵⁹.

The French perspective on Islam in Morocco emphasized a-historical, a-political, and Orientalized aspects, while excluding other characteristics. For instance, French colonial ethnographers highlighted elements such as the sharifian lineage and *baraka*¹⁶⁰ as central characteristics of the of the Sultan and Islamic practices in Morocco¹⁶¹. This approach dehistoricized and depoliticized some socio-cultural elements of Islam in Morocco while disregarding others, such as the religious-judicial role of the ulema (Burke III 2014). By doing so, French colonial authorities aimed to construct a specific discourse on Morocco, supposedly steeped in superstitious beliefs and frozen out of history, which needed to be brought into modernity and thus colonized. Hoping for developmental interventions, the monarchy and intellectual elites legitimized this discourse on Moroccan Islam.

Building on Burke’s analysis, I argue that colonial discourse on Moroccan Islam was repurposed post-decolonization to forge a collective identity centered around Arab-Islamic and monarchical elements (Burke III 1998). This adapted discourse was crucial in maintaining the role of the sultan, later king, as a central figure. In 1946, the monarchy was not universally

¹⁵⁹ This approach stands in contrast to the one adopted in Algeria, where Algerian territory was directly assimilated into France, leading to the systematic erasure and marginalization of local populations (Parsons 1976).

¹⁶⁰ *baraka* denotes specific powers related to charisma or divine blessing.

¹⁶¹ It’s essential to note that the claim to sharifian descent was not exclusive to the ‘Alawi dynasty but was also asserted by other religious and social elites (Rhani 2014). Similarly, the concept of *barakah* is often attributed not only to the king, but also to specific individuals like saints, marabouts, or spiritual leaders (Jamous 1981).

regarded as crucial to Morocco's nation-building, and nationalists from both the right and left displayed varying levels of resistance to it. Some advocated for establishing a republic, while others saw the monarchy as a remnant of colonial rule (Spadola 2013). It was the shrewdness of Mohammed V in asserting his leadership in the nationalist movement, combined with French missteps (particularly, the exile to Madagascar), that solidified the monarchy's central authority after independence.

To assess his power, the king strategically weakened the nationalist movement by leveraging the politico-religious divisions between urban Salafi and rural Sufi elites (Spadola 2013). Following independence, Mohammed V exploited divisions between rural elites, who adhered to traditional Sufi beliefs¹⁶², and urban-educated nationalists who supported *al-salaf al-sālih*, a reformist movement from the late 19th century advocating a return to the foundational practices of Islam¹⁶³ (Belal 2011). Mohammed aligned with the Salafi reformists to gain the support of the nationalist movement. However, he soon began to manipulate the nationalist divisions, forging strategic alliances with rural and Tamazight-speaking local elites (Leveau 1985). This strategy secured him support from right-wing nationalists, while left-wing nationalists, who opposed the monarchy, were forced to negotiate compromises (Mohamed Tozy 1999; Waterbury 1970).

Mohammed V transformed the discourse on Moroccan Islam from a colonial construct into a powerful tool for building political alliances in post-independence Morocco. Moroccan Islam became a means to discredit any political opposition, branding any criticism of the monarchy as treacherous or even unfaithful to Islam. This narrative evolved into a societal project focused on the sultan-turned-king, highlighting his combined political and religious role as Commander of the Faithful¹⁶⁴. This approach continued under his successors, Hassan

¹⁶² Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is a form of Islamic spirituality that emphasizes the pursuit of a connection with God through the purification of the soul and mystical practices. In Morocco, Sufism has played a pivotal role, with numerous confraternities deeply embedded in the country's social fabric, contributing to its significant communal and cultural dimensions. Beyond its function as a religious practice, Sufism is also intertwined with networks of social support and fosters a strong sense of belonging; pilgrimages to the shrines of Sufi saints, are central to the religious experience of many Moroccans, serving as key moments in their spiritual and communal lives (Cornell 1998; Salvatore 2016).

¹⁶³ This movement emphasized the revitalization of Islamic law and the Arabic language, and the purification of what they considered heretical expressions of Islam, such as Sufism. Anthropologist Emilio Spadola highlights how the public condemnation of Sufi religious practices begins with the rise of nationalism. In doing so, they aimed to challenge the existing power structure and transcend a social order based on religious practices that created class divisions, emphasizing the importance of reforming and modernizing society and the community of believers (Spadola 2013).

¹⁶⁴ The title "Commander of the Faithful" extends beyond mere symbolism. Historically reserved for Sunni Caliphs, it emphasized the role of a both spiritual leaders and protector of Islam, thereby solidifying the religious foundation for the political authority (Poirson and Oprisko 2014).

II and Mohammed VI, though they pursued different strategies. Hassan II intensified the Islamization of society, whereas Mohammed VI opened up to Morocco's multicultural and multilingual heritage (Mohamed Tozy 1999). Hence, despite these differing policies, the monarchy consistently relied on the narrative of Moroccan Islam to consolidate its power. This narrative reveals itself as an all-encompassing system, intertwining religious, political, and cultural dimensions, and was strategically employed to weaken or co-opt opposition forces against the monarchy, regardless of their nature or origins (Jensen, 116 and Stenberg, 68 in Baune 2005).

In this regard, the Islamization of the education system not only bolstered alliances with the nationalist movement but also imposed a uniform model of Islam in Morocco. During the Years of Lead, the monarchy's promotion of Salafism, favored for its anti-socialist and anti-pan-Arabist tendencies, was expected to ensure Salafi loyalty to the monarchy and refrain them from being political opponents. However, this openness towards conservative Islamic ideologies, coupled with global disenchantment from the failures of nationalism and pan-Arabism, spurred various Islamic societal projects—some confronted the monarchy directly, while others operated within its bounds (Bouyahya 2015; Halverson and Greenberg 2017). The main challenge for what I call Islam-oriented “societal counter-projects” involved ensuring their survival, evolving, and exerting influence within the socio-political narrative of Moroccan Islam.

5.2.2 Counter-projects Within and Beyond Moroccan Islam

During Hassan II's reign (1961-1999), Morocco saw profound shifts in its economic, social, and political spheres, fueling the emergence of Islamist movements. During the 1970s and 1980s, economic austerity led to widespread public discontent, sparking food riots and mass demonstrations. This turbulent atmosphere provided fertile ground for the rise of anti-systemic movements, particularly as political parties failed to effectively rally opposition (Munson 1986). Harsh economic conditions led to significant rural-to-urban migration. Facing high unemployment and scarce social services, the newly urbanized population sought hope and a new system in Islamist movements (Belal 2011). The monarchy subtly supported these movements to diminish Marxist influence, promoting Islamist groups in educational and religious circles (Ḍarīf 2010; Mohamed Tozy 1999; Spadola 2013). The global rise of Islamic movements, especially after Iran's 1979 revolution, and the decline of Marxist states in the

early 1990s, shifted Moroccan youth towards Islamism as a key identity component (Burgat 2016)¹⁶⁵.

The most structured and active Islamist organizations include *al-‘adl wa al-ihsān*, the Justice and Benevolence movement (AWI), and *hizb al-‘adāla wa al-tanmiyya*, the Justice and Development party (PJD). AWI was founded by Abdesslam Yassine, a former school inspector with Sufi affiliations. Yassine became well-known in 1973 after criticizing Hassan II in an open letter, rejecting his title of Commander of the Faithful¹⁶⁶. Upon his release, Yassine officially founded AWI, a movement deemed illegal at the time. AWI operates outside the formal political system, maintaining an ideological and religious opposition to the monarchy. Its leadership, especially Yassine, combined a Sufi-inspired spiritual vision with political activism, aiming for systemic change through peaceful means (Mohamed Tozy 2009). Following Yassine’s death in 2012, AWI saw a decline in support even though it has maintained a grassroots presence, particularly through its social activism and educational initiatives. Today, despite still being officially banned, the movement is tolerated within Morocco (Yafout 2017).

The PJD emerged as Morocco’s main “reformist Islamist” party (Macías-Amoretti 2015). Originally part of a broader movement that distanced itself from violence and sought institutional legitimacy¹⁶⁷, it became a parliamentary force in the 1990s. The original organization rebranded as the *ḥaraka al-tawḥīd wa al-iṣlāḥ* (Movement of Reform and Unity, hereafter MUR), which today serves as the PJD’s ideological and activist arm (Mohamed Tozy 2009). After the Arab Spring¹⁶⁸, the PJD gained significant strength, winning the 2011 elections, and forming a coalition government led by Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane. Despite winning again in 2016, Benkirane struggled to form a government due to internal conflicts and political instability. In March 2017, King Mohammed VI replaced him with Saadeddine Othmani, who accepted palace conditions to form a coalition. The PJD’s influence sharply declined in the 2021 elections, dropping from 125 seats to just 13. Throughout its trajectory,

¹⁶⁵ Numerous studies on the origins of Islamism in Morocco show that it originated in the 1960s and 1970s, within the context of decolonization and the ideological crisis of secular and socialist political currents. Influenced by transnational Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Moroccan Islamism emerged as an ideological and political response to socio-economic changes, a perceived increase in Westernization, and a loss of Islamic identity (Belal 2011; Mohamed Tozy 1999; Ḍarīf 2010; Entelis 2005).

¹⁶⁶ Yassine also emphasized his ancestral connections to the Prophet Muhammad, positioning himself as a “poor Idrisid of Sharifian origins” (Yassine, quoted in Burgat and Dowell 1993, 166).

¹⁶⁷ The party’s origins can be traced back to the Shabiba Islamiyya (*al-shabība al-islāmiyya*), the first Islamist organization in Morocco, active during the 1970s and 1980s, and dissolved due to its involvement in deadly violent attacks (Mohamed Tozy 2009).

¹⁶⁸ For a brief overview of the 2011 protests and uprisings in Morocco, see chapter 6.

the PJD has maintained a cooperative stance with the monarchy, avoiding direct challenges to the king's religious and political authority.

Despite their opposition, the two groups represent counter-projects that challenge the monarchy's official narrative. Yassine's political theory argues that the regimes in the Maghreb and Islamic world lack the moral and political legitimacy vital to Islam, focusing instead on consolidating economic control (Burgat and Dowell 1993; Burgat 2016). Consequently, AWI aims to redefine the "Islamic state" concept and challenge the monarchy's religious legitimacy¹⁶⁹. In contrast, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), aims to influence politics from within the system, positioning itself as a "loyal opposition". It advocates for moral reforms without overtly blaming the monarchy for the country's problems. Although rooted in Islamic values, the PJD primarily uses these principles to secure political legitimacy, frequently contrasting its ethical position with the perceived materialism and corruption of other political parties (Beltrán and Macías-Amoretti 2017; Tomé-Alonso 2021; Seniguer 2012).

Once more, the monarchy's response to the growing influence of political counter-projects involved a blend of repression, division, and co-optation. This approach first included tightening control over individuals and institutions engaged in Islamic education (Leveau 1993). In the early 1960s, key Islamic institutions like Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez were placed under the direct oversight of the Ministry of Education. Originally founded in 859 CE as a madrasa, Al-Qarawiyyin was later restructured by King Hassan II into a state-controlled institution dedicated to the training of Islamic scholars. While this move symbolically elevated the ulema by distinguishing them from modern intellectuals, it also had a strategic purpose: to transform these scholars into state officials. By incorporating them into the state apparatus, the monarchy aimed to reduce the risk of ulema criticizing government policies (Ibid. 1993). As state employees, the ulema became more reliant on the regime, making them less likely to oppose decisions, especially those that conflict with Sharia principles. This co-optation not only limited their role as potential critics but also ensured their alignment with state directives (Mohamed Tozy 2013; 2009).

The establishment of the Regional and Supreme Ulema Councils in 1981, chaired directly by the king, further curtailed the autonomy of the ulema in overseeing Islamic education, centralizing religious authority under the monarchy (Munson 1993). This move not only diminished the ulema's independence but also coerced their involvement in social and political

¹⁶⁹ The organization aims to transform Morocco into an Islamic State governed by mutual consultation (*shūrā*) and Sharia principles. This vision includes economic, military, and political liberation of Muslim lands and replacing hereditary monarchy with an elected Islamic leader.

affairs. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the monarchy strengthened its control over the religious sphere by supervising mosque construction, standardizing Friday sermons, and restricting mosque activities to prayer times only (Darīf 2010). On the other hand, the royal palace not only tolerated but sometimes actively supported Islamist factions such as the Saudi Wahhabi Salafi movement¹⁷⁰. The monarchy employed Wahhabi Salafists—who opposed both leftist movements and AWI’s ideology—to counteract its political adversaries and curb the rising influence of Yassine’s group.

However, the relationship with the Salafists shifted notably after September 11, 2001’s terrorist attacks, and especially following a major terrorist attack in Casablanca on May 16, 2003¹⁷¹. These events marked a significant turn during the reign of Mohammed VI as they represented a mean for the new king to promote the “exception” of Moroccan Islam (Belal 2011). The early years of Mohammed VI’s reign saw political, cultural, and economic openings and efforts to reconcile with the Years of Lead under Hassan II. This relative openness allowed the king to distance Moroccan Islam from Wahhabism, to craft a narrative of tolerance and religious stability. The shift included reaffirming a religious heritage by embracing Malikism as the juridical school (*mazhab*), Ash‘arism as the theological school (*kalām*)¹⁷², and Sufism (*taṣawwūf*) as spiritual guidance¹⁷³, aiming to position Morocco as a center of moderate Islam (Spadola 2013).

The concept of the “Moroccan exception”, highlighting Morocco’s role in promoting a tolerant Islamic discourse and education, has influenced both its foreign and domestic policies (Sambe and Hamdaoui 2019). Internationally, Morocco has positioned itself as a key interlocutor in Islamic matters with Western societies, significantly boosting its influence in Europe, culminating in the establishment of the European Council of Moroccan Ulema in Brussels in 2008. Domestically, the monarchy has centralized religious authority, leading to

¹⁷⁰ Wahhabism originated from the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abdelwahhab in the 18th century. Its influence, expanded through a historic alliance with the Saud family, reshaped Saudi Arabia’s religious and political landscape. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Moroccan monarchy sought support from the Saudi royal family to mitigate leftist influences, allowing the Saudis to spread Wahhabism in Morocco through various means including publications, audio recordings, significant financial support, and the introduction of preachers (Munson 1993)

¹⁷¹ In May 2003, Casablanca was hit by coordinated terrorist attacks attributed to a group linked with the global jihadist network, including the militant Islamist organization Al-Qaeda.

¹⁷² Ash‘arism is a theological school within Sunni Islam, established by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari in the late 9th century. It reconciles the theological doctrines of traditional Sunni Islam with rational thought, emphasizing that while human reason is important, ultimate knowledge of divine matters comes through revelation.

¹⁷³ Sufism is a mystical Islamic belief system focused on the inward search for God and shunning materialism. It emphasizes personal spiritual connection, devotion, and the pursuit of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God.

significant reforms that established a state-controlled model of Islam¹⁷⁴. Following PJD's electoral victories in 2011 and 2016, the Palace normalized and integrated the party into the government system, effectively sidelining its radical fractions. Meanwhile, the king has actively promoted Sufism, both symbolically and materially, leveraging internal conflicts within different Sufi brotherhoods to his advantage¹⁷⁵. At the same time, the reorganization of the management model for religious practices and institutions that took place between 2000 and 2010 facilitated the establishment of rhetorical cornerstones in official discourses on Islam. This crystallized in the promotion of the "Islam of the right middle" (*al-wasatiyya*) aimed at legitimizing and reinforcing this new vision of religious governance in the country¹⁷⁶.

Through this strategy, the monarchy not only managed to co-opt and marginalize political opponents, avoiding direct forms of repression that might have exacerbated tensions, but also established strategic control over the clergy. The clergy, in turn, was transformed into a pivotal ally of monarchical power, entrusted with legitimizing and reinforcing the sovereign's authority by propagating a vision of Islam carefully aligned with the interests of the Palace. This approach proved highly effective for the king, enabling him to consolidate his authority while mitigating potential political threats. Simultaneously, it helped avert the escalation of violence and forestall pressures that could have led to regime change. In this context, Moroccan Islam is not merely an all-encompassing system; it functions primarily as a crucial political instrument. It underpins an ideological framework that serves as a cornerstone for both nationalist and subsequently monarchical projects, cementing the image of the sovereign as the ultimate guarantor of the nation's unity and stability. Despite the Palace's success in advancing a hegemonic narrative of national collective identity, dissenting voices and counter-narratives continued to surface, revealing enduring undercurrents of contestation. This tension is particularly evident in the third pillar of the national motto, "*al-waṭan*", the nation, which encompasses not only the country's geopolitical boundaries but also its symbolic ones. In the next subchapter, I will delve into the intricate and interwoven relationship between identity and territoriality.

¹⁷⁴ The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, whose minister is directly appointed by the king, has bolstered its control over mosques, and the training of imams and ulema (Maddy-Weitzman and Zisenwine 2013).

¹⁷⁵ In 2002, Mohammed VI appointed Ahmed Taoufiq, a member of the Sufi brotherhood *al-tarīqa al-qādiriyya al-būdashshīya*, as Minister of Islamic Affairs, endorsing Sufism over both Salafist orthodoxy and competing Sufi factions. This appointment is still in effect today.

¹⁷⁶ The reform of the ulema is discussed in the Introduction, III.I, and in subchapter 6.3, with a focus on how social actors enacted it in subchapter 9.3.

5.3 Al-Waṭan/Akal: *The Battlefield of Territorial Identity*

The post-independence national narrative emphasized the restoration of a territorial unity believed to have existed prior to the protectorate. However, this narrative does not accurately reflect the dynamic evolution of alliances among various centers of power in pre-colonial Morocco (Berque 1965). Before the establishment of the protectorate, the territory of the Sharifian Empire was only partially controlled directly by the sultan and his administration, known as the Makhzen¹⁷⁷. The remaining areas were governed by decentralized power structures, which may or may not have been under the sultan's authority¹⁷⁸. With the signing of the Treaty of Fez on March 30, 1912, Morocco was divided into specific spheres of influence¹⁷⁹. The establishment of the protectorate led to the creation of a country with increasingly precise spatial boundaries, reinforced through systematic territorial mapping (Borghi and Soriani 2006). Railways, roads, and telegraph networks connected previously remote areas to the rest of the country, and colonial ethnography produced censuses, land surveys, and the codification of tribal law to control populations (Burke III 2014). This groundwork allowed the king, post-independence, to achieve a level of state sovereignty and administrative centralization that was unattainable during the pre-colonial period.

5.3.1 *The Green March: Constructing Territorial Identity*

The centralization, bureaucratization, and nationalization during the colonial period significantly transformed Morocco's political landscape, leading to an unprecedented politicization of its territory. This politicization led to the post-independence narrative promoting land reunification as a cornerstone of nationalist and monarchical revendications.

¹⁷⁷ “*Makhzen*” literally means “storehouse” or “warehouse” and it is likely originated from the verb *kaḥana*, (“to store up”). It refers to the system of governance and central authority that has historically played a significant role in the country's political structure. Before the protectorate era, the Makhzen served as a tool for the centralization of power and control, enabling the sultan to maintain authority over the diverse regions and tribes within the country. In contemporary times, the Makhzen remains a significant force in Moroccan politics, closely associated with the monarchy and the royal administration. It represents the central power and authority of the state, encompassing the king, key government officials, and the administrative apparatus (Claisse 1992).

¹⁷⁸ The Atlas and Rif mountains were largely influenced by Amazigh tribes, while remote rural areas were governed by local chiefs or notables, who either aligned with the sultan or acted independently. Additionally, port cities like Tangier, Casablanca, and Essaouira had unique power centers, often shaped by international trade (Wyrzten 2015).

¹⁷⁹ France assumed control over most of the country, while Spain was granted authority in designated northern and southern regions; the port city of Tangier and its immediate surroundings became an international commercial zone. The colonial territorial control did not occur all at once but unfolded over a period from 1907 to the mid-1930s through multiple phases and strategies (Wyrzten 2011).

Indeed, borders left unresolved by Spanish and French protectorate, namely the southeastern and southern borders with Algeria and the disputed Western Sahara, became the battlefield for identity construction centered around the land. This narrative finds its foundational myth in the Green March. The event, organized by Hassan II, which saw 350.000 participants march across the border into Spanish Sahara, symbolized the process of national unification through a narrative on territorial identity.

To fully understand its socio-political significance, the Green March must be contextualized within the history of territories once under Spanish and French colonial rule. Spain returned the northern zone of its protectorate in 1956 but retained the Saharan provinces of Ifni and Tarfaya as autonomous provinces¹⁸⁰. In the 1970s, a UN resolution advocating self-determination for the Spanish Sahara sparked the rise of Sahrawi independence movements, most notably the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front). The UN's July 1974 resolution on Spanish Sahara's autonomy escalated tensions between Morocco, which claimed the territory, and the Polisario Front, pushing for complete independence. Morocco's appeal to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) led to a ruling that dismissed its territorial claims but recognized historical ties between local tribes and the sultan through Islam¹⁸¹. In response, Morocco highlighted this same ICJ decision, emphasizing national unity and territorial integrity as outlined in the United Nations Charter.

The concept of "reunification" between Western Sahara and Morocco, anchored in the political-religious bonds between the sultan and the Sahrawi tribes, was central to the monarchy's campaign during the Green March (Hassan II et al. 1990). On October 16, 1975, the same evening as the ICJ decision, Hassan II unveiled in a radio speech¹⁸² a secret plan developed over the previous two months to mobilize 350,000 people for a peaceful march under the green color of Islam across Western Sahara to bring Moroccans "home" (*Annuaire de l'Afrique du nord*. 1975 1976, 14:982). He concluded with quotes from the Hadith and the Quran, emphasizing the spiritual and nationalistic motives behind the march¹⁸³. This narrative,

¹⁸⁰ Excluding the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, still nowadays under Spanish sovereignty.

¹⁸¹ However, the Court emphasized that these ties should not supersede the UN's self-determination resolution. The ensemble of the case's document is accessible in the online repository of the ICJ. See "Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 1975", International Court of Justice's Online Public Repository, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/61>.

¹⁸² Hassan II's communications are stored in the digital repository of the Center for Western Sahara Studies at the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. See "Discursos y cartas del rey de Marruecos relativos al Sahara Occidental", <https://www.usc.es/gl/institutos/ceso/Marruecos-Discursos-del-rey.html>

¹⁸³ "May God make our noble intentions the guide for our journey, aimed at reclaiming our land and building our future. Do not forsake us, O my God, after having guided us on the right path, You who are Merciful" (Ibid. 985).

emphasizing an Arab-Islamic identity, underpinned the myth of national unity, now tied to territorial claims.

Behind this extensive mobilization, framed as guided by divine will, lay Hassan II's intent to tie his image to the unification of the kingdom, a tactic previously employed by his father. Through the Green March, Hassan II achieved several objectives. In the short term, he aimed to align his leadership with the nationalist cause and enhance his image during the tumultuous period of the Years of Lead (Rollinde 2003). Furthermore, he tackled complex foreign and domestic issues involving Algeria, Spain, and the United Nations (Ferrié 2012). Additionally, he reasserted control over the Royal Armed Forces, which had previously been influenced by various nationalist opponents (Ibid. 2012).

Beyond these immediate objectives, the Green March had lasting impact on Morocco's collective consciousness. Hassan II skillfully merged the concepts of "*umma*" and "*al-waṭan*", uniting the Islamic community with the pan-Arabic nation under his singular leadership. This strategy secured long-term benefits for the monarchy: it mobilized mass support around the figure of the king through a shared narrative; it contested the colonial legacy by simultaneously adopting its same approach of modernizing and developing the country under the sultan's banner; and it strengthened the king's international legitimacy through the principle of self-determination. In doing so, Hassan II successfully secured the symbolic and material authority of the monarchy over the Moroccan nation, both domestically and internationally.

5.3.2 "Awal, Akal, Afgan": *Contesting Territorial Identity*

While the Green March reinforced the monarchic nationalist narrative of "one land governed by one king in the name of one God", unresolved issues regarding the Sahara have continued to contribute to instability and uncertainty in the region to this day¹⁸⁴. In post-independence Morocco, territorial identity has emerged as a significant battleground. Alongside Sahrawi demands, other political movements focusing on territorial identity have

¹⁸⁴ Following the Green March, negotiations involving Spain, Mauritania, and Morocco led to an agreement recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. This move faced opposition from the Polisario Front, which, in 1976, declared the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Although the SADR gained recognition in 1982 from the Organization of African Unity (now African Union), the international community did not universally acknowledge it. In 1991, the UN proposed a referendum on Western Sahara's self-determination, hindered by Morocco, which instead proposed autonomy under its own sovereignty. Over the years, Morocco has strengthened its connections with several African countries, rejoining the African Union in 2017, despite objections from the Polisario Front. The Western Sahara conflict persists, significantly impacting regional dynamics and leaving the Sahrawi population in fragile conditions, particularly in refugee camps controlled by the Polisario Front.

emerged, notably the Amazigh Cultural Movement (ACM). Adapting the national motto to the Tamazight version “*Awal, Akal, Aɣgan*” (“Language, Land, People”), this movement grounds the idea of historical, cultural, and linguistic territory as a fundamental element of Amazigh identity (“Amazighness”)¹⁸⁵. However, what distinguishes the ACM from the Saharawi movement is its anchoring of the concept of land to symbolic rather than physical boundaries (El Aissati 2005). This difference needs to be contextualized within the movement’s development.

Amazigh demands began to coalesce around the concept of territory as the repository of a marginalized language and culture. These demands were influenced by French linguists specializing in the Tamazight language, activism in the Algerian Kabyle region, and the dissenting, secular discourse of the Moroccan left¹⁸⁶. In 1967, the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange, the first Amazigh cultural association, was founded, primarily composed of the urban educated class (Pouessel 2012). However, it was only at the 1993 UN forum that the Amazigh issue gained international attention. From that pivotal moment onward, Amazigh aspirations primarily focused on securing legal recognition and preservation for their language and culture (Desrues and Tilmatine 2018; Maddy-Weitzman 2006). This aspiration manifests in various forms of rehabilitation and protection against the pressures of Arab-Islamic nationalism at the national level and the influences of cultural globalization at the transnational level (Merolla 2019; Soulaïmani 2016a).

For the ACM, the struggle for Amazigh identity recognition revolves around the concept of land, which takes on the characteristics of a founding myth. Unlike Sahrawi claims, the land issue for the ACM, at least in Morocco, is not tied to a specific independentist goal but rather represents the cradle of a language and culture that transcend geopolitical boundaries, reaching into the diaspora (Merolla and Dahraoui 2017). In this sense, *tamazigha* (“homeland” in Tamazight) represents a symbolic territory for the ACM, emphasized as a means of

¹⁸⁵ “Amazighness” refers to a collective awareness of being Amazigh and/or belonging to the Amazigh people, and it is often used as a self-descriptive term by Amazigh activists (Rouighi 2019; 2011). However, various authors have demonstrated that this political construct has indeed historically situated trajectories (Mohamed Tozy, Aït Mous, and Lakhsassi 2006; Wyrzten 2013; Camps 1983).

¹⁸⁶ French linguists, such as André Basset and Lionel Galand, who specialized in the Tamazight language, played a significant role in bringing attention to the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Amazigh people. Additionally, the activism in the Algerian Kabylie region, led by figures such as Mouloud Mammeri, inspired Amazigh activists in Morocco. The Berber Spring of 1980, a series of protests in Kabylie against the Algerian government’s Arabization policies, highlighted the struggles of the Amazigh people and galvanized similar movements across North Africa. Moreover, Moroccan leftist groups, such as the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP) and its offshoot, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), often incorporated Amazigh issues into their critiques of the State’s policies, advocating for greater cultural and linguistic rights (Ben-Layashi 2007).

highlighting Amazigh history and identity rather than as a claim for independence (Mohamed Tozy, Ait Mous, and Lakhsassi 2006, 58–59). In this sense, land, whether symbolic or tangible, becomes crucial for reconstructing and giving continuity to a fragmented history. Historian Eric Hobsbawm shows how this reconstruction occurs through discourses and practices that selectively use, and sometimes invent, the past and tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). An example of this “invention of tradition” is the figure of the revolutionary Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi and the Republic of the Rif¹⁸⁷, claimed both by the ACM as an Amazigh hero and by Arab nationalists as a symbol of the anti-colonial struggle¹⁸⁸.

Furthermore, asserting an identity linked to a symbolic and cultural territory allows for addressing other aspects of post-independence national identity, such as religion and monarchy, without explicitly mentioning them (Almasude 2014; Amiras 2011; Ben-Layashi 2007). This strategy, which promotes the cultural and linguistic visibility of a community without challenging the system, is similar to that of the PJD, which calls for moral reform of society without questioning the monarchy’s legitimacy. In Morocco, questioning territorial integrity, the monarchy, and Islam, is a crime, whereas promoting the preservation of a linguistic-cultural heritage tied to a historical territory is not (Silverstein 2012). The ACM’s approach was effective until Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999. While continuing the policy of coercion and assimilation of political dissent, the new king initiated a process of relative openness to Morocco’s multicultural and multiethnic history.

This openness is evident in the inauguration speech of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, the IRCAM, in 2001. Speaking from the homeland of the king’s Amazigh mother in the Middle Atlas countryside, Mohammed VI expressed his intention to integrate the Amazigh issue as an essential part of the imagined Moroccan community. After reaffirming the trinity of Moroccan national identity, the king acknowledged and emphasized the historical importance of Amazighness¹⁸⁹. By connecting his own heritage to Amazigh roots and

¹⁸⁷ Muhammad bin ‘Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi (1882-1963) was an Amazigh leader and military strategist who played a significant role in the Rif War (1920-1927) against Spanish and French protectorate in the northern Moroccan Rif region. In 1921, with the support of local tribes, Abd el-Krim dealt a major blow to the Spanish, triggering a significant crisis for the Spanish military and government. This led to the intervention of French forces alongside the Spanish, culminating in the suppression of the Rif resistance in 1926. Throughout the conflict, Abd el-Krim established a de facto independent State in the Rif region, known today as the Republic of the Rif. Under his leadership, the State implemented social reforms, modernized the administration, and forged diplomatic relations with some European countries (Feliu, Dieste, and Brichs 2019).

¹⁸⁸ Anthropologist François Pouillon Raymond Jamous propose an analysis of the historical revision the Rif Republic (Pouillon and Jamous 1976).

¹⁸⁹ For a comprehensive account of the king’s speech see, “*Discours d’Ajdîr*”, IRCAM website, last access, December 13, 2023, <https://www.ircam.ma/fr/textes-fondateurs/discours-dajdir>.

institutionalizing Amazigh claims within a monarchy-founded institution¹⁹⁰, the king initiated a long-term strategy to co-opt the ACM's agenda and minimize the movement's influence within Moroccan society. This move has caused a split within the movement, with some activists supporting the institute's program and others viewing it as a tool for the state's appropriation of Amazighness.

More than four decades after Morocco's independence, Mohammed VI abandoned homogenizing policies in favor of a more transformative approach to constructing the Moroccan national identity. However, this transformation did not challenge the trinity on which the imagined Moroccan community was founded, rather, it reinforced it, as evidenced in the preamble of the 2011 Constitution:

“The kingdom of Morocco, a sovereign Muslim state attached to its national unity and territorial integrity, intends to preserve, in its plenitude and diversity, its one and indivisible national identity. Its unity, forged by the convergence of its Arabo-Islamic, Amazigh, and Saharan Hassani components, is nourished by its African, Andalusian, Hebrew, and Mediterranean influences. The preeminence accorded to the Muslim religion in this national reference is consistent with the attachment of the Moroccan people to the values of openness, moderation, tolerance, and dialogue for mutual comprehension among all the cultures and civilizations of the world”.

As clearly stated in the constitutional preamble, the three pillars of post-independence national identity—allegiance to the throne and the king, Arab-Islamic ethnic-religious unity, and territorial integrity—are now complemented by a fourth pillar: the commitment to a democratic and constitutional monarchy rooted in a multiethnic history. This new element emerged not only to assimilate the ACM's demands but also to address the intense societal pressure from the protests and uprisings that swept across most countries in the Middle East and North Africa starting from 2010 (Beinin and Vairel 2013; Faris 2013). This wave of protests and uprisings, known as the Arab Spring, arrived in Morocco during a period of profound societal transformation. This was due, as we have seen, to changes in governance under the reign of Mohammed VI. Additionally, the causes of the protests in Morocco can be traced to demands for reforms, allegations of human rights violations, accusations of economic corruption, complaints about high unemployment and poverty rates, and dissatisfaction among educated youth (Desrues 2012b; Desrues and Paredes 2019). Above all, these protests took

¹⁹⁰ For further details, see *Dahir Du 29 Rajab al Khaïr 1422 (17 Octobre 2001) Portant Création de l'Institut Royal de La Culture Amazïghe* 2001.

place during a time of significant change in the public sphere, facilitated by the rise of new media, especially the Internet (Herrera 2014).

In the next chapter, I will examine the significant transformations in what I term “spaces of mediation” in Morocco, before and after the digital age. I will illustrate how mainstream mass media in Morocco have served as pivotal tools in shaping and disseminating hegemonic narratives on collective national identity. These platforms have played a key role in reinforcing monarchical power by promoting values that underscore the unity of the nation under the king’s leadership. Through its strategic control of media, the monarchy has firmly established itself as the central pillar of Morocco’s national identity. This position endured even during the Arab Spring, a period when grassroots activism—amplified by the rise of new spaces of mediation such as social media platforms—posed a significant challenge to the monarchy’s political authority for the first time since the Years of Lead. At the conclusion of the chapter, an analysis of the specific ways in which the Islam-oriented groups studied in this research utilize media, and social media platforms in particular, will offer a valuable perspective on how power in Morocco has adapted to and sustained itself within a rapidly changing social and technological environment. This examination will highlight the interplay between these groups’ strategies and the broader mechanisms of power, shedding light on the evolution of Morocco’s political and social structures in the digital age.

SPACES OF MEDIATION BEFORE AND AFTER THE DIGITAL AGE



Fig. 11 Former Prime Minister and PJD leader Saadeddine Othmani holding a video-conference meeting with heads of political parties during lockdown, 2020. Photo by MAP. © MAP.

The construction of power in Morocco has undergone processes of homogenization and centralization that, from the colonial era until the end of Hassan II's reign, have played a crucial role in defining a national identity grounded in ethno-linguistic and religious foundations. During the reign of Mohammed VI, while efforts to impose homogenizing policies were set aside, the centralization of power was nonetheless reinforced. This was achieved through strategies of cooptation that, instead of homogenizing differences, acknowledged the country's socio-cultural diversity and incorporated it into a vision of a harmonious socio-cultural coexistence. These processes have consolidated within what I term "spaces of mediation". By this, I refer to those spaces where specific messages and actions about the construction of a national collective identity, are conveyed and performed, enabling a process of mediation between individuals, society, and its institutions. This concept highlights two fundamental

aspects of power construction: the spatial dimension, which concerns the control and organization of physical and symbolic spaces where power is exercised and manifested; and the communicative dimension, which refers to the processes through which power is articulated, negotiated, and legitimized via social interaction.

In recent history, the pivotal role of these spaces of mediation in reshaping power dynamics became especially apparent during the Arab Spring¹⁹¹. The significance of the Arab Spring lay not only in its broad, cross-class, and intergenerational participation but also in the striking visibility of the protests in public spaces. Although these were not the first mass demonstrations to occur in public spaces, they marked a critical turning point in how such spaces were utilized for political expression. Popular discontent emerged in symbolic locations, often situated in central squares, main streets, historical monuments, and administrative buildings. Avenue Bourguiba in Tunis, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and Pearl Roundabout in Manama (Bahrain) served as stages for public demonstrations of discontent, which had long been confined to domestic, private, or intermediary spaces (e.g., schools and universities, cafes, cultural venues, sports clubs, and so on). Moreover, the increasing proliferation of satellite TV channels outside regime control and the widespread availability of the Internet—facilitated by the installation of infrastructure, the expansion of Internet cafes, and the growing use of mobile phones and social media—redefined the dichotomous representations of public and private spaces in the region¹⁹². These movements will mark the first mass protests and revolutions in the region to be directly diffused on social media and satellite television.

The events of the Arab Spring, which impacted Morocco between 2011 and 2012, with significant aftershocks in 2016 and 2018, prompted a reconfiguration of spaces of mediation and a redefinition of their uses. During this period, emerging or revitalized discourses and practices emerged, finding expression in new spaces of mediation such as social media

¹⁹¹ The term refers to a period of socio-political upheaval from 2010 to 2013, marked by protests, uprisings, and, in some cases, revolutions across various countries in the Middle East and North Africa. This era was characterized by widespread popular movements fueled by deep-seated discontent with authoritarian rule and demands for democratic reforms. The protests went beyond immediate grievances, embodying aspirations for human rights, social justice, and economic opportunities. Citizens rallied against oppressive regimes, seeking more equitable governance and a better future (Amar and Prashad 2013).

¹⁹² This dichotomy is rooted in academic Orientalism, which often divided public space (men's domain) from private spaces (women's domain). The paradigm emerged in colonial urban planning studies, like William Marçais's article, *L'islamisme et la vie urbaine* (1928), and was used by post-independence regimes for social control, thus showing a convergence between their spatial concepts and Orientalist ones (Asad 1973; Said 1978). It is interesting to notice that this view influenced also social research on Arab and Muslim worlds until postcolonial theories emerged. In this regard, Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, exploring the evolution of Arab world anthropology and its colonial legacy, introduced the concept of "the politics of place" to highlight how certain geographic zones are associated with specific theoretical concepts (Abu-Lughod 1989, 271).

platforms. However, unlike most countries affected by the Arab Spring, Morocco's regime remained largely stable, presenting itself to both domestic and international audiences as a virtuous exception in the region (Saint-Prot and Rouvillois 2013). Rather than accepting this narrative at face value, I argue that the outcomes of the Arab Spring in Morocco should be understood through the lens of how power is constructed and reproduced in the country, particularly within spaces of mediation. The interactions within these spaces have shaped both the construction of spaces, the evolution of discourses, and the reconfiguration of the subjectivities in Morocco. Chapter 6 focuses on the dynamic relationship between communication, media, and politics in Morocco, drawing on a theoretical framework that integrates the concept of the "public sphere" with insights from social media theory. This approach aims to analyze how Morocco's public spaces shape and are shaped by public discourses, both before and after the advent of the digital age. By doing so, it seeks to explore how the Islam-oriented social actors examined in this thesis engage and position themselves within this dynamic interplay. Hence, the chapter is structured into three main sections. First, I will outline this framework and provide a historical overview of Moroccan media governance (subchapter 6.1). Then, I will examine the Internet's role in mass-mediated politics and social order in Morocco (subchapter 6.2). Finally, through an ethnographic lens, I will focus on how Islam-oriented groups position themselves and navigate within these spaces of mediation (subchapter 6.3).

6.1 *Media in Morocco: A Surveilled Public Sphere*

The interplay between public opinion, media, and politics is a well-documented topic in academic research. A prominent theoretical framework in this field has been formulated by philosopher Jürgen Habermas through the notion of "public sphere". Habermas's concept of *öffentlichkeit* (literally, "the fact of being open"), developed within his reflection on the formation of modern democracies, defines a social space where individuals can engage in open debates, thereby fostering a public opinion capable of influencing public authorities (Habermas 1989). Habermas's theory has prompted several interpretations and critiques⁶¹; however, the concept of public sphere remains crucial for understanding how discussions among individuals can influence power structures and shape political formations in modern societies.

Sociologist John B. Thompson's work builds upon Habermasian theory to understand how mass media transforms modern societies, particularly in the context of states' control and monopoly of information (Thompson 1995). Thompson develops a social theory of mass

media, delving into how media interacts with social structures, institutions, and norms. Nonetheless, he diverges from Habermas' s perspective by arguing that media are more than just conduits for conversation; they generate new forms of “publicness” based on visibility rather than face-to-face dialogue (Ibid. 1995, 119). This leads to the emergence of new public groups, divided into media producers and audiences (Ibid. 1995, 235).

With the advent of the digital age, the analyses of Thomson and Habermas have been revisited and expanded in numerous studies, influenced by technological advancements and enriched by theoretical developments, including post-colonial perspectives and non-Western-centric approaches¹⁹³. In the context of the Arab and Muslim world, technological changes in the region, such as the emergence of satellite channels, the Internet, and mobile phones, have spurred extensive research on what has been called “the Arab public sphere” (Salvatore 2013; El Oifi 2004; Lynch 2006; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Eickelman and Salvatore 2002; Ayish 2003). Focusing on the role of media and communication technologies in shaping public discourse and political participation, this literature examines the diverse arenas where communication unfolds.

In the following pages, I will apply this theoretical framework to analyze the evolution of the public sphere in Morocco, treating it as a series of communication arenas that both shape public opinion and impact institutional dynamics. I will provide a brief historical overview of the evolution of Moroccan media platforms, including print, radio, television, and digital media. This approach will allow me to outline the various spaces where discourse on Morocco's imagined community is mediated. With Mohammed VI's accession to the throne, the media sector shifted from homogenizing policies to transformative practices that enhance pluralism in public opinion, also aided by the impact of the Internet. However, the Moroccan public sphere remains under the surveillance of the regime's power.

6.1.1 *Media Governance Before and After Mohammed VI*

Originally designed to serve the interests of colonial administrators through print press and radio in the early 19th century, the Moroccan information system underwent significant

¹⁹³ Numerous studies revisited and critiqued Habermasian theory, often addressing its inherent ethnocentrism and gender bias. In the studies of what has been defined “the Arab public sphere”, scholars like Dale F. Eickelman and Armando Salvatore offered a non-Western genealogy of the concept, emphasizing the incorporation of religion in its evolution (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). Furthermore, the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser has challenged the Habermasian vision of *öffentlichkeit* as an ideal of universality, equality, and freedom in her article, highlighting the presence of relations of domination, exclusion, and discrimination in the public sphere (Fraser 1990).

transformation during the protectorate period, with nationalist Arabic press emerging as a key political tool for anti-colonial mobilization. Following Morocco's independence, the strongly partisan nature of the press, with most newspapers owned by the major political parties (e.g., the *Istiqlal*) and used as instruments of political propaganda, underscored the deep ties between the press and political landscape. Radio was first introduced in Morocco in 1928 with stations in Rabat to support colonial objectives, and later expanded to Tétouan under the Spanish protectorate. During the independence struggle, radio stations became crucial for communication and resistance, broadcasting the voices of exiled nationalist leaders from across Europe (Daghmi, Pulvar, and Toumi 2012).

Hassan II prioritized radio and television over print media to strengthen his leadership. Introduced in the early 1950s, television began with a license issued to the French company TELMA, starting broadcasts in March 1952¹⁹⁴. However, after a suspension in 1955 due to political instability, TELMA's facilities were reacquired by the state in 1960, and both television and radio were nationalized. This reorganization paved the way for the nationalization of Morocco's broadcasting sector and the creation of what is now today known as the National Company for Radio and Television (*al-sharika al-waṭaniyya li-al-izā'at wa al-talfaza*, hereafter SNRT). In 1984, the telecommunications infrastructure was also nationalized and placed under the supervision of the National Office of Posts and Telecommunications (ONPT) (Hidass 1999).

With the launch of its first channel in 1962 and the introduction of color broadcasts by 1972, television became part of the modernization narrative promoted by Hassan II. Above all, the state monopoly on media enabled the monarchy to exert tight control over communication within the public sphere. This centralized control was instrumental in framing the national narrative and suppressing dissenting voices, thereby reinforcing the monarchy's position and its policies (Kavanaugh 1998). However, nationalization did not translate into technical and qualitative improvements in infrastructure; the ONPT, managed predominantly by officials rather than specialized engineers, frequently experienced inefficiencies and delays in the development of advanced technologies and in maintaining service standards (Achy 2005).

In March 1989, the launch of 2M International marked a significant structural shift as the first terrestrial pay-tv channel in the Arab world, challenging the state monopoly and paving

¹⁹⁴ The main shareholder of TELMA was the *Montrouge Compteurs* company, a pioneer in the technical development of television in France, see the webpage *Les radios au temps de la TSF*, March 24, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230930191048/https://www.radiotsf.fr/telma-premiere-television-privee-francaise/>.

the way for commercial television (El Yahyaoui 1995). Although financial strains and competition from free satellite channels led the Moroccan state to take control of 2M in 1996, this development had already set the stage for further privatization in the media sector¹⁹⁵. Concurrently, responding to global trends of market deregulation and recognizing a growing gap between limited supply of services and rising demand for effective telecommunications, the Moroccan government adopted a free-market approach (Ayish 2003).

At the rise of Mohammed VI to the throne, Morocco's media landscape was already undergoing privatization. His reign marked a shift from the homogenizing and repressive policies of his father, with the additional influence of the Internet and smartphones bringing significant technological and social change. Mohammed VI's democratization efforts revitalized the print media, leading to the emergence of numerous new publications targeting middle-class audiences and creating a more diverse and competitive market (Benchenna, Ksikes, and Marchetti 2017). The radio sector also saw modest diversification and modernization, though it remained dominated by SNRT and a few other firms (Hidass 2010)—radio broadcasting market remained highly concentrated between SNRT. At the same time, telecommunications infrastructure modernization became a key focus of government reforms¹⁹⁶. This period also witnessed the rise of new political figures from the private media sector, shifting the political power dynamics away from traditional party affiliations¹⁹⁷.

Despite the relative openness and the influx of new global actors¹⁹⁸, Mohammed VI's media policy continued to prioritize the preservation of monarchic authority; however, this

¹⁹⁵ Currently, 2M is under State control as the main shareholder and has been broadcasting in the clear since January 1997.

¹⁹⁶ In 2002, steps were taken to reform the legal framework that had enabled government dominance over the communications sector. This included the establishment of the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) by royal decree, aimed at ending the government's monopoly over national broadcasting and facilitating the issuance of licenses in the television and radio sectors. See the official website of HACA. Accessed, November 22, 2021. <https://www.haca.ma/en/presentation>. However, such measures have proven inadequate in limiting State control over media content, as highlighted by various reports on press freedom and communication in the country. For more details, see the webpage of Reporters Without Borders, accessible on the following website, last access, January 12, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/country/morocco-western-sahara>.

¹⁹⁷ It is the case for Aziz Akhannouch, who was elected Prime Minister in the 2021 elections representing the RNI (National Rally of Independents) party. Beyond his political role, Akhannouch is a prominent businessman with a substantial economic empire that includes significant investments in the telecommunications sector.

¹⁹⁸ Although competition in the television market has increased due to satellite channels, control remains concentrated among a few organizations, with a significant share still held by the state. According to the Media Ownership Monitor report, Moroccan television sector exhibits a marked concentration, with the two major companies, the state-owned SNRT and the public/private SOREAD, collectively controlling 47.41% of the audience. SNRT operates 80% of the registered TV channels in Morocco, while SOREAD is state-owned at 71%,

focus evolved from a strategy of systematic repression to one of more targeted information surveillance. A clear illustration of this approach is the establishment of the state-owned channel *2M Monde*, which followed the legalization of satellite dishes in 1992¹⁹⁹. During a period when private satellite channels were transforming the Arab media landscape by offering a wide array of content and alternative sources, the Moroccan government sought to uphold its informational monopoly and regulate the plurality of voices in the media (Hidass 2010).

Mohammed VI's media surveillance strategy is complemented by the ongoing use of television as a tool for monarchic propaganda, now employed to distance his reign from his father's legacy. A key example of this is the live national broadcast of the findings from the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER). Established in 2004 to address human rights violations during the Years of Lead under Hassan II, the IER investigated and documented government abuses from 1956 to 1999. The broadcast of the commission's findings was not only a significant step toward transparency but also strategically framed as part of a national reconciliation process. This approach helped the monarchy maintain control over the public narrative while presenting an image of openness and reform.

This shift in media governance under Mohammed VI was shaped also by the coinciding profound transformation in Morocco's telecommunications landscape. His reign aligned with the rise of telephones, especially mobile phones, and, more significantly, the widespread adoption of the Internet. Introduced in the late 1990s and initially confined to urban areas, mobile phones quickly expanded into rural regions, experiencing significant growth throughout the 2000s (Haut-commissariat au Plan 2022). By 2007, the number of mobile phone subscribers had already surpassed 19 million, covering approximately 62.9% of the population (Kriem 2009). Concurrently, the advent of the Internet facilitated the spread of personal computers in Moroccan households, although widespread adoption was initially slow²⁰⁰.

assigning the State a predominant role as the main shareholder in the country's two leading television companies. The detailed information regarding media ownership concentration and other data can be accessed on the website of the Media Ownership Monitor, a component of the Global Media Registry project. This initiative, co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, aims to enhance transparency in media ownership on a global scale. Data related to Morocco dates to 2017. Accessed, January 17, 2023. <https://www.mom-gmr.org/en/countries/morocco/>.

¹⁹⁹ Targeted at audiences in the Arab world and Europe, *2M Monde* aimed to counter the dominance of channels like Al Jazeera while simultaneously maintaining control over information (Daghmi, Pulvar, and Toumi 2012).

²⁰⁰ Until the early 2000s, only about 7% of the population owned a computer. In 2021, that figure has risen to 68% (International Telecommunication Union 2021).

The advent of Internet 2.0 and smartphones has fundamentally transformed media and technology investment in Morocco. The state has made significant investments to enhance economic competitiveness and technological penetration. Between 2009 and 2013, with the World Bank-funded *Maroc Numeric 2013* program, the country promoted PC usage, and e-government²⁰¹. Following digital strategies (e.g., *Maroc Digital 2020* and *Maroc Digital 2030*) furthered these efforts, positioning Morocco as a regional digital hub. These initiatives have led to the highest broadband penetration rates in Africa, with its telecommunications sector contributing over 3% to the country's GDP and accounting for 12% of government fiscal revenues (Douai and Moussa 2020). While this has positioned Morocco as a leading example of telecommunications development in Africa, it also mirrors a broader global trend of market deregulation and neoliberal policies.

The rise of digital technologies in Morocco has significantly influenced media and technology consumption patterns. At the start of the 2000s, the disparity in access to digital led to the rapid proliferation of Internet cafés, especially in urban areas, while rural regions lagged behind due to limited infrastructure and resources (Susan Schaefer Davis 2004). These cafés became crucial for youth, providing affordable access to the web and serving as hubs for social interaction, learning, and connecting with global cultures, echoing earlier dynamics in which media (e.g. television) acted as a bridge between local traditions and global influences (Susan S. Davis and Davis 1995). Additionally, these public spaces often represented the first environments outside of the family home or school where young adults could meet without worrying about gender mix, as it was permitted in these places. Internet cafés thus became crucial venues for socialization, autonomy, and independence for many young adults. Finally, the swift rise in the popularity of Internet cafés reflected the growing demand for digital connectivity in a society where traditional media remained predominantly state controlled (Baune 2005).

With the rise of social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, digital consumption has significantly evolved, becoming more mobile-centric. This shift is underscored by the 2021 statistic showing 137 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, a sharp increase from just 7 landline subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2010 (International Telecommunication Union

²⁰¹ I am referring to the strategy "MAROC NUMERIC 2013", a MAD5.2 billion (approximately US\$520 million) agreement with banking institutions aimed at implementing a project for achieving nationwide access to high-speed internet by 2013. See Cour des Comptes. 2014. "Rapport sur Evaluation de la Strategie MAROC NUMERIC 2013". 05/13/CH IV. Rabat : Royaume du Maroc, Cour des Comptes.

2021)²⁰². Additionally, between 2020 and 2022, WhatsApp was the most widely used social media platform in Morocco, followed closely by Facebook²⁰³. The widespread use of mobile devices and social media in Morocco mirrors a global trend where these devices have become the primary and most affordable means for accessing the Internet and engaging in digital communication, aligning the country with global trends. These technological advancements have not only broadened access to information but have also driven a significant cultural and social transformation within the country. This shift has also begun to reshape social interactions and identity formation in Morocco (Caubet in Benítez Fernández et al. 2013; Caubet 2018).

The digital age has not only significantly disrupted the monopoly and dissemination of information in Morocco's mainstream media (Mohsen-Finan 2009); it also played a critical role in fueling social movements and protests through the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube during the Arab Spring (Brouwer and Bartels 2014). In response, the Moroccan government implemented a series of strategic measures aimed at consolidating state power through enhanced control over digital media. On one hand, it made significant investments in developing digital infrastructure, promoting the spread of Internet access across the country, and positioning Morocco as a regional leader in digital technology adoption. Alongside these advancements, monitoring and regulatory tools were introduced to maintain strict control over the flow of online information²⁰⁴. This response was driven by the fear that the Internet could become a powerful tool for political mobilization capable of challenging state authority. The political use of the Internet in Morocco is the focus of the following subchapter.

6.2 *Internet's Impact on Grassroots Activism*

With the evolution of digital technologies, political communication has increasingly shifted from television to the Internet, fundamentally transforming the methods and spaces of public debate. Digital media have transcended Thompson's traditional division between content producers and consumers, a model where a narrow elite controlled the creation and distribution of information to a largely passive audience. In the digital age, the boundaries between producers and consumers have blurred, enabling greater participation and interaction.

²⁰² For an infographic on infrastructure, access, and utilization of telecommunications and digital media in Morocco in 2021, see Appendix 5.

²⁰³ For a chart on social media use in Morocco between 2010 and 2023, see Appendix 6.

²⁰⁴ I analyze the regime's control over digital media in subchapter 6.2.

Users can now create and disseminate content, redefining traditional roles in the media landscape. However, this unprecedented speed and accessibility in the circulation of information have also brought about new challenges.

Control over digital platforms is concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations, which can limit the Internet's democratic potential. The spread of disinformation, the amplification of extreme voices, and the rapid dissemination of content have led to increased data theft, plagiarism, and the propagation of unverified information, where opinions are often presented as facts. These issues undermine media credibility and complicate the process of distinguishing between truth and misinformation, with significant implications for the public sphere and political discourse. In this context, the political use of the Internet has become significant, offering new pathways for political expression while also presenting challenges in terms of information control and regulation.

In Morocco, the political use of Internet has become increasingly relevant in shaping the country's socio-political landscape (Najar 2013b). As digital media have gained widespread adoption, they have emerged as powerful tools for political expression, mobilization, and organization. This chapter explores how the Internet has been harnessed by various actors, including activists, political movements, and the state itself, to influence public opinion, challenge authority, and consolidate power. By examining key events and developments, such as the rise of digital activism, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the Internet has transformed political dynamics in Morocco. The wave of protests that happened in Morocco in 2010-2011 and subsequently in 2016-2017 took place in the context.

The 2011 protests in Morocco, while ostensibly focused on demands for employment opportunities, economic growth, combating political corruption, and advocating for social reforms, were deeply rooted in the broader process of digitization that was transforming the country. Before the protests, Morocco had been grappling with significant socio-economic challenges. Despite promises of social reforms and economic growth under King Mohammed VI, widespread poverty, unemployment, and stark inequalities persisted. The king's early years in power had raised expectations for a more prosperous and just society, but the reality fell short as the gap between rich and poor widened, and public frustration grew (Emperador Badimon and Bogaert 2014; Emperador-Badimon 2020; Mekouar 2018). Additionally, corruption remained endemic, with many viewing the political and economic elite as deeply entrenched in practices that favored their own interests over those of the general populace (Mohammed Tozy 2011).

This internal discontent, coupled with the wave of protests and revolutions sweeping across the MENA region, was largely ignored by the traditional mainstream media, which had long been under state influence. However, emerging satellite television channels and online platforms such as blogs, Facebook, and YouTube, played a pivotal role in both the genesis and proliferation of these movements (Gerbaudo 2015). Satellite channels like Al Jazeera broadcasted the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and other countries, providing a continuous stream of real-time coverage that transcended national boundaries. Meanwhile, social networks, accessible through the computers in the numerous Internet cafés that had proliferated across Morocco, acted as virtual megaphones, amplifying the voices of protestors and facilitating mass mobilization on an unprecedented scale²⁰⁵.

For the first time, Moroccans were able to witness events, such as the demonstrations in Tahrir Square or Avenue Bourguiba, directly from their Facebook feeds. This access to live images and reports, significantly altered the dynamics of political engagement in Morocco, empowering citizens to organize and participate in protests more effectively. The 20th February Movement, which became the largest mass mobilization in Morocco since the Years of Lead, is a prime example of this shift (Brouwer and Bartels 2014). The movement, which was named after its first major demonstration on that date in 2011, originated on Facebook, where activists used the platform to coordinate actions, disseminate information, and gather support (Desrues 2013; Hoffmann and König 2013). This digital mobilization marked a turning point in Moroccan political activism, illustrating the impact that digital technologies can have on political processes (Brouwer and Bartels 2014).

In 2016, social media once again catalyzed a significant social movement in Morocco's history (Jaloza 2020). The immediate trigger for what would become the Hirak of the Rif was a tragic incident in the northern city of Al Hoceima, where a fish vendor named Mouhcine Fikri was crushed to death by a garbage truck while attempting to retrieve fish that had been confiscated by the police. The entire episode was captured on a smartphone and quickly shared online, where it went viral within hours. This graphic footage, which circulated rapidly across social media platforms, sparked widespread outrage, particularly among the marginalized communities in the Rif region, but also resonated in major cities across Morocco and within the Moroccan diaspora abroad.

The Hirak movement, named after the Arabic word for “movement” or “agitation”, was rooted in long-standing grievances in the Rif region, an area historically neglected by the central

²⁰⁵ According to the ITU, in 2009 there were about 850,000 Facebook users in Morocco, in 2012 they were 4.45 millions (International Telecommunication Union 2013).

government and plagued by socio-economic disparities, high unemployment rates, and limited access to basic services. The Rif has a distinct cultural and political identity, with a history of resistance against central authority dating back to the colonial period and the early years of Moroccan independence²⁰⁶. The mass demonstrations that followed were not merely a reaction to Fikri's death, but rather the culmination of long-standing socio-economic marginalization and systemic violence inflicted by the state in a region where authority is consistently challenged. The government's repressive measures over the years have left a lasting impact, fostering a collective memory of injustice and alienation among the Riffians. These underlying tensions, combined with the pervasive sense of injustice highlighted by Fikri's death, created a fertile ground for the rapid mobilization that ensued.

For the first time in Moroccan history, a social movement was not only organized but also livestreamed in social media like Facebook, thanks to the widespread availability of smartphones and advancements in social media technology²⁰⁷. This allowed for real-time dissemination of protest activities, reaching audiences far beyond the immediate geography of the Rif. The movement gained traction both within Morocco and among the Moroccan diaspora, which played a crucial role in amplifying the movement's message and sustaining its momentum. The movement suffered severe repression, with numerous leaders being arrested and handed long prison sentences. Additionally, the movement's online activities were heavily targeted, and organizers were closely monitored and tracked (Metivier 2019). The government attempted to quell discontent in the region by promising development projects, but these efforts were largely perceived by the local population as insufficient and failing to address the deeper issues at hand.

The social movements of 2011 and 2016 led to significant achievements, such as the adoption of a new constitution following a popular consultation²⁰⁸, and the enactment of

²⁰⁶ Figures like Abd El Krim and events like Rif War (1921-1926) and the subsequent repression in 1958-1959 have left a lasting mark on the collective memory of the Rif, fueling a persistent sense of distrust and resistance toward the Makhzen.

²⁰⁷ This marked the beginning of new forms of digital activism in Morocco, which gained traction during the 2018 protests. These took the form of a large-scale economic boycott, organized via social media, targeting major companies accused of price inflation in key sectors like fuel, water, and dairy. The campaign highlighted the power of digital platforms in mobilizing citizens and pressuring corporations (Echine 2019; Chaaibat 2020; Mohamed, Douai, and Iskandar 2019).

²⁰⁸ In 2011, a participative platform called *reform.ma* was created, enabling thousands of citizens to contribute to the development of the new constitution. However, only 20% of the citizens' proposals were considered in the drafting of the constitutional text (D. Zaid 2016).

legislation allowing citizens to submit petitions to the government²⁰⁹. However, the effectiveness of these concessions has been widely questioned, as the implementation of these initiatives has often fallen short of expectations. For instance, the outcomes of the popular consultation were only partially considered when drafting the new constitution, and despite the adoption of new legislative measures, the king has retained significant control over the legislative and executive branches of the Moroccan state. This has led to skepticism about the genuine intent behind these reforms and has done little to alleviate the deep-rooted mistrust in the government (M. Bennani-Chraïbi 2017).

On the other hand, Moroccan political institutions have actively responded to the digitization of political dissent, particularly after the events of 2011 and 2016 (Jebnoun 2020). While exponentially increasing online access, the state has also deployed sophisticated surveillance systems and leveraged existing laws to control and repress the spread of discontent (Errazzouki 2017). The Moroccan Penal Code and the Press and Publishing Law have been amended to allow for the censorship of online content deemed a threat to national security or the stability of the regime²¹⁰. As a result, numerous bloggers and social media users have been arrested on charges of spreading what authorities consider false or subversive information²¹¹.

The use of surveillance software by the state has also been attested. In 2011, the website *Mamfakinch*, which was linked to the 20th February Movement, fell victim to an attack using the Remote Control System surveillance software. This software enabled the monitoring of communications, access to personal data, and the tracking of online activities. In subsequent years, the Moroccan government escalated its surveillance tactics with the adoption of Pegasus spyware, which allowed for the interception of messages, emails, photos, and even the activation of microphones and cameras to monitor private conversations. Despite the lack of

²⁰⁹ In 2016, the Moroccan parliament adopted a law enabling citizens to submit petitions and motions to the government. However, the constraints set by the legal framework and public authorities result in citizens' requests being fully controlled by State institutions, thereby offering little space for participation (Colin 2023).

²¹⁰ These laws include detention penalties for journalists and grant the government extensive powers to filter and remove online content considered detrimental to Islam, the monarchy, territorial integrity, or public order (Benchenna and Marchetti 2021).

²¹¹ In February 2021, Chafik Omerani, a Moroccan American citizen and YouTuber, was arrested, sentenced to three months in prison, and fined 40,000 dirhams (approximately 4,000 euros). He was charged by the prosecution for posting online videos that were considered contemptuous of constitutional institutions, bodies, and public officials. See "Morocco: Call for the immediate release of activist Chafiq Omrani and an investigation into reports of his torture". Website of the Geneva Council for Rights and Liberties. Friday 11, 2021. <https://genevacouncil.com/2021/02/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7/>.

official investigations by the Moroccan judiciary, independent journalistic sources have uncovered the use of these surveillance tools to monitor and intimidate activists, journalists, and political opponents²¹². These findings underscore the Moroccan regime's preference for a strategy of technological surveillance over direct repression, as a means of maintaining political control and suppressing dissent. This approach reflects a further shift in the regime's strategy towards surveillance, assimilation, and co-optation, prioritizing these over direct repression (Volpi and Stein 2015; Madhi 2013; Kohstall 2014).

While the 20th February Movement and the Hirak are deeply rooted in specific socio-economic and political contexts, they also reflect the transformative impact of digital mediation on political activism (Acharoui et al. 2020; Hoffmann and König 2013). The production and circulation of media content, combined with the immediacy of social media and the ability to discuss taboo topics, have facilitated the rise and organization of protests (Desrues 2012a). Public participation has grown through online discussions, surveys, and petitions (Douhan, Landucci, and Richter 2022). Social media has amplified the movements' visibility, often through emotionally charged content (Ouassini 2021). Global connectivity has enabled international collaboration, allowing movements to gain support from similar groups worldwide (Merolla and Dahraoui 2017). This shift marks a turning point in Moroccan social movements, with social media emerging as the primary platform for dissent, surpassing traditional channels and directing demands to the main stakeholder, the monarchy (Desrues 2013).

In conclusion, grassroots activism manifested during the 2011 and 2016 protests is deeply intertwined with the transformation of Morocco's public sphere. This period saw the rise of digital media and the consequent development of new forms of political communication, engagement, and action. However, it is important to recognize that these changes in the public sphere were not solely driven by the advent of the so-called "new media". They were also shaped by broader political, economic, and social transformations or crystallization dynamics within Moroccan society. Considering the impact of the Internet purely as a catalyst for democratization and the liberation of speech would be not only simplistic but also empirically inaccurate (D. Zaid 2016; Couldry 2015). In this sense, the Islam-oriented groups examined in

²¹² International media and human rights advocacy organizations have documented numerous cases of attacks on Moroccan journalists. See Tom Brewster, "When governments attack – online", BBC webpage, April 15, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20140414-when-governments-attack>; "Un journaliste marocain victime d'attaques par injection réseau au moyen d'outils conçus par NSO Group", Amnesty International web page, June 22, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/research/2020/06/moroccan-journalist-targeted-with-network-injection-attacks-using-nso-groups-tools/>.

this thesis engage with spaces of mediation not as a means of pursuing liberation or resisting social norms, but rather to reconfigure their visibility and legitimacy²¹³. These groups, which include religious institutions, civil society organizations, and intermediary bodies such as unions, operate within Morocco’s hegemonic normative framework, referred here as Moroccan Islam²¹⁴. It is within this framework that these actors negotiate their social role and relevance. Rather than positioning themselves in resistance to the normative system, Islam-oriented groups adhere to it, leveraging its framework to legitimize their presence and amplify their influence within Morocco’s social fabric. Therefore, spaces of mediation, particularly social media, become essential tools for positioning themselves as intermediaries between the power infrastructures and the society.

6.3 *Spaces of Mediation of Islam-Oriented Groups*

The groups referred to in this thesis as “Islam-oriented”²¹⁵ include institutions, organizations, and groups rooted within the societal project of Moroccan Islam. As discussed in chapter 5, this framework organizes the norms governing both private and public spheres around Islam as an all-encompassing system. This alignment of power within Islam serves a dual purpose: it legitimizes the king’s political authority by grounding it in religious terms, while also imposing upon every “good Moroccan citizen” the expectation of being a “good Muslim” as a prerequisite for achieving social recognition. The same dynamic applies to holders of Islamic capital—whether religious, political, or associative—who subordinate themselves, or more precisely, subjectivize themselves in the Foucauldian sense²¹⁶, to the principles of the Moroccan Islamic framework in order to preserve their symbolic capital and maintain their social influence.

Although these groups share the overarching goal of aligning with the normative framework Moroccan Islam, their roles vary significantly. If Moroccan Islam were visualized as a spectrogram, Islam-oriented groups would occupy different positions depending on their function and their degree of proximity with the state institutions. As outlined in the introduction of the thesis, Al-Amal, as an NGO, can be classified as a community organization

²¹³ These points are thoroughly examined in Part 3 of the thesis, specifically in chapters 8 and 9.

²¹⁴ The analysis of the construction of the social project associated with Islam in Morocco is discussed in chapter 5, specifically in subchapters 5.1 and 5.2.

²¹⁵ For more details concerning the use of the term, see Introduction, III.I.

²¹⁶ According to the philosopher Michel Foucault, “subjectivation” is the process through which individuals become “subjects” (Foucault 2004b). The subjectivation process of Islam-oriented individuals is explored in greater detail in Part 3, chapter 9 and the Conclusions, III.

operating as an institutional ally. From this position, it gains both material and symbolic advantages²¹⁷. In contrast, OREMA formally acts as intermediary body between students and university institutions due to its role as a student union. However, given that unions in Morocco can be formally prohibited if they question the regime's authority, I argue that OREMA rather functions as a mediator—or more precisely, a guarantor—of students in relation to Moroccan society²¹⁸. Finally, the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq operates as a religious institution and serves as a local extension of the state's religious authority, which is embodied by the Supreme Council of Ulema²¹⁹.

These three positions significantly influence how Islam-oriented groups approach and interact with spaces of mediation in distinct ways. This variation highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of their strategies and practices in navigating these spaces. The theoretical perspective in this subchapter aims to demonstrate that the theory of the Arab public sphere, introduced in subchapter 6.1, must be complemented by analyzing how public spaces and discourses are actively shaped, negotiated, and transformed by local socio-cultural dynamics. This approach draws on theoretical perspectives from Francophone social geography and urban anthropology of Arab cities. These perspectives challenge the reductive Eurocentric and Orientalist classifications of Arab public and private spaces, often limited to architectural criteria (Raymond 1995; 1998; Johansen 1990; Arnaud 2005; Depaule and Arnaud 1986; David 2002). Instead, they advocate analyzing spaces in relation to the societies that create and use them, as well as the power dynamics, domination, dependency, and resistance that unfold within them (Banos 2009; Lefebvre 2000; Hillier and Hanson 1984; Campbell 1994). This theoretical framework underpins qualitative studies on contemporary Arab and Muslim urban societies, exploring how spaces *take shape* through practices and discourses (Taïeb, Bekkar, and David 1997; Belguidoum, Cattedra, and Iraki 2015; Kapchan 1996; Mermier 2014; Berry-Chikhaoui 2009; Nachi 2013; Remaoun and Henia 2013).

Adopting this perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how social actors actively transform public spaces to assert their presence, negotiate power, and engage with broader societal narratives. Field observations among Islam-oriented groups have underscored that the ways in which social actors engage with—or refrain from engaging with—spaces of mediation offer valuable insights into the processes of constructing, negotiating, and reconfiguring the

²¹⁷ For general details about the NGO Al-Amal, see Introduction, III.I. For a detailed discussion of Al-Amal's structure and activities, see Part 3, particularly 7.2.2.

²¹⁸ For general details about the student union group OREMA, see Introduction, III.I. OREMA's social role for students is further examined in Part 3, chapter 9.

²¹⁹ For general details about the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq, see Introduction, III.I.

normative framework of Moroccan Islam. For instance, groups like OREMA have privileged the Internet from their inception to attract audiences and disseminate their discourses. In contrast, the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq has historically relied on traditional communication channels, such as radio and television, only recently turning to social networks during the pandemic. This shift was driven by the need to maintain contact with their audience when face-to-face interactions were no longer possible. Al-Amal presents yet another approach. The NGO has historically not relied on mainstream or digital media because it has primarily secured its strategic, material, and symbolic support through alternative channels such as lobbying, social networks, and direct interactions with stakeholders. However, the pandemic marked a turning point, pushing Al-Amal to reassess its engagement with social media platforms. Analyzing how each group occupies and navigates mediation spaces is essential to understanding the specific strategies they employ. These spaces must be examined through the lens of power dynamics, focusing on how Islam-oriented groups utilize them to structure and negotiate their influence. The following pages explore these dynamics in greater detail, with particular attention to the role of digital media.

6.3.1 *Internet's Uses Within Islam-oriented Groups*

The three Islam-oriented groups emerged within a historical context spanning the late 1990s to the early 2000s, a period marked by rapid transformations in Morocco's media landscape. During this time, the advent of satellite television disrupted the state and party-controlled monopoly over media²²⁰. As the student and union branch of the Islamist movement MUR, OREMA's communication strategy was closely intertwined with the media practices of the MUR and its party emanation, the PJD²²¹. This connection profoundly influenced the development of OREMA's approach to communication. As an Islamist movement, the MUR historically prioritized personal interactions and the use of mosques as central spaces for proselytism. However, it also made significant investments in traditional media, such as radio and television, and later in digital platforms, as part of a broader effort to extend its influence.

The emphasis on media was driven by two key objectives. Firstly, the commitment to *da'wa* (Islamic proselytism) focused on disseminating and promoting Islam through education, preaching, and the mobilization of Muslim communities. Secondly, especially at the beginning of its formation, the MUR leadership sought to establish an independent media space that

²²⁰ For an analysis on media governance in Morocco, see subchapter 6.1.

²²¹ For an overview of the student union OREMA, see Introduction, III.I. For an analysis on the origins of the MUR and the PJD, see 5.2.2.

could challenge both the hegemony of state-sanctioned Islam, controlled by the monarchy, and the narratives advanced by other currents of Moroccan Islamism (Eickelman 1996). In this respect, the MUR's media approach bore similarities to that of AWI under Yassine, which aimed to create an autonomous public sphere as a platform for promoting an ideological alternative to institutionalized Islam (Leveau 1993). Nevertheless, the MUR's media strategy underwent a significant transformation with the PJD's transition to a governing party, which necessitated a shift away from its earlier anti-establishment positioning. By recognizing the king's religious and political authority and avoiding direct criticism of the monarchy, the PJD—and, by extension, the MUR—no longer pursued the creation of an independent public sphere. Instead, they refocused their efforts on integrating into the existing public sphere, aiming to secure a prominent role within it and, in doing so, to achieve political legitimacy and long-term survival (Eickelman 2005).

OREMA situates itself within this context, drawing on the material, financial, and symbolic resources provided by the MUR and the PJD to establish and expand its presence within the university context. Interviews with OREMA members highlight how the union had access to substantial funding, which was initially used to produce newspapers, books, and audio cassettes. These resources were later redirected to fund the creation and management of a national blog, representing a significant shift in OREMA's communication strategy. With the emergence of social media, OREMA further diversified its approach by adopting platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. This enabled the organization to reach a wider audience and enhance its influence. Over time, OREMA moved away from mainstream media, and focused instead on two primary avenues: in-person interactions through local and national meetings, and digital communication through social media platforms²²². The strategic use of digital tools allowed OREMA proved to be a highly effective means of disseminating messages, organizing events, and amplifying its political discourse²²³.

OREMA rapidly adopted the use of the Internet for a combination of economic and strategic reasons. First, the web offered a far more cost-effective and efficient communication channel compared to traditional media such as printing brochures or books, or utilizing radio.

²²² These forms of communication are explored through a detailed ethnographic analysis, see Part 3.

²²³ Social media use is not unique to OREMA; other student unions also rely on these platforms. However, OREMA's superior material and financial resources has allowed it to dominate the media sphere of the unionism. Moreover, it has benefited from the communication strategies of the PJD, a leader in digital outreach during the 2000s. This success was largely attributed to Abdelilah Benkirane, co-founding member of the PJD and Prime Minister in its 2011-led government. Unlike often inaccessible political speakers, Benkirane was known for his clear and relatable communication style, incorporating Darija and occasional Tamazight expressions. He also prioritized addressing everyday social issues, such as corruption, over the moral concerns of the *umma* (Dialmy 2000; El Haitami 2016; M. Bennani-Chraïbi 2017; Macías-Amoretti 2015).

The costs of creating, managing, and maintaining a website were significantly lower than those required to establish and sustain a publishing operation or broadcasting network—a benefit that became even more pronounced with the rise of social media platforms. Additionally, the Internet allowed OREMA to overcome geographical and logistical barriers, facilitating the coordination of collective actions through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The speed and extensive reach of digital communication enhanced the management of national initiatives, enabling a more consistent communication strategy and fostering cohesive, organized participation across the various local branches of the student union²²⁴. Equally significant was the association of an online presence with modernization, particularly during the early stages of Internet proliferation. Interviews with OREMA members revealed that having a digital presence was perceived as a symbol of openness to modernity. This perception proved crucial in countering the negative stereotypes often attributed to Islamist movements, which were frequently portrayed as backward or resistant to progress.

Unlike OREMA, the Council of Ulema of M'diq-Fnideq did not need to establish its legitimacy within Morocco's public sphere. As an institution of the state, fully subordinate to the monarchy, the council serves as a tool of monarchical authority, operating within spaces of mediation to ensure its monopoly on public discourse. This is the direct outcome of the broader restructuring of the legal and religious system aimed at consolidating the political and religious legitimacy of the monarchical regime: reforms initiated in the 2000s, and further intensified in the following decade, transformed the ulema into strategic agents of the Makhzen²²⁵. In this context, the Council of Ulema operates not merely as a religious authority but as a state mechanism designed to secure the regime's dominance in public discourse and influence over public opinion (Mohamed Tozy 2013).

The relationship between the ulema and the monarchy is based on a foundational principle of Islam: the *bay'a*, the oath of allegiance that affirms the alignment of the sovereign, as Commander of the Faithful, with the criteria for leadership over the *umma*. This act is particularly significant when it is conferred by the ulema, who hold the exclusive religious authority to certify the Islamic legitimacy of governance. Far from being a mere symbolic ritual, *bay'a* constitutes a binding mechanism that subordinates the ulema to the central authority (Burke III 2014; Daadaoui in Maddy-Weitzman and Zisenwine 2013; Eickelman 1985). It not only requires their endorsement of the king's policies but also compels them to actively participate in their religious justification. Within this dynamic, the ulema are

²²⁴ Homogenized forms of communication within OREMA are further analyzed in Part 3, chapter 8.

²²⁵ For further details of the ulema's role in Morocco, see Introduction, III.I.

transformed into agents of monarchic politics, charged with upholding not only the spiritual authority of the king but also the policies of the state. They are tasked with countering alternative Islamic narratives that might challenge the official narrative and promoting an interpretation of Islam that serves the regime's interests (Dialmy 2000; Mohamed Tozy 2013). This control over the ulema by the monarchy serves a clear purpose: to integrate them as state functionaries who provide religious and legal validation for the normative framework of Moroccan Islam.

This distinctive role of the ulema in Morocco has placed them at the center of the country's public sphere, a position that was already evident in traditional media long before the advent of the Internet. As the official representatives of Moroccan Islam, the ulema disseminate their message through a variety of pro-state channels, including local and national radio and television stations as well as newspapers. The creation of media outlets such as *Radio Mohammed VI pour le Saint Coran* in 2004 and the Assadissa television channel in 2005 marked a significant turning point in the effort to solidify the hegemonic narrative of Moroccan Islam (Daghmi, Pulvar, and Toumi 2012; Sonay 2017). These state-controlled platforms have been established not only to provide religious education to the broader population and promote an official interpretation of Islam, they serve as key instruments of political legitimization, blending religious messaging with the reinforcement of monarchic power (Bendahan and Akhiate 2020; Sambe and Hamdaoui 2019).

With the increasing spread of the Internet in Morocco, the ulema have adopted online communication strategies to expand the reach of the hegemonic religious discourse into the digital sphere while countering the growing influence of independent religious authorities on the web. Although no explicit national directives were issued to prompt the ulema to embrace digital platforms, the COVID pandemic significantly accelerated the virtualization of their activities. This transition underscored the Internet's dual role: it is not only a tool for reaching a wider audience but also a symbolic and political resource that the state uses to reassert its authority over religious matters. By doing so, the Moroccan regime ensures that its interpretation of Islam remains the sole legitimate one. The case of the Ulema Council in M'diq-Fnideq illustrates how their adaptation to new technologies and strategic engagement with the internet reflects the Moroccan regime's capacity to navigate the challenges of the digital era. Furthermore, through this process, the ulema have solidified their role as mediators between society and the state, maintaining their influence as local religious authorities²²⁶. By incorporating religious discourse into digital mediation, the regime uses the ulema and their

²²⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the ulema's engagement with online spheres, see in Part 3.

digital presence as tools to consolidate its control over symbolic capital while simultaneously tightening its control over the ulema themselves.

The approach adopted by the NGO Al-Amal in occupying spaces of mediation stands in contrast to that of both OREMA and the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq. A closer analysis of how Al-Amal positions itself in these spaces sheds light on its transformation from a pious Islamic association into an NGO operating within a neoliberal framework. This transformation reflects a dual process: on the one hand, a strategic adaptation to the dynamics of development governance, and on the other, a shift in leadership prompted by political changes that unfolded between the late 1990s and the 2020s in Morocco²²⁷. Until the years 2010 Al-Amal was primarily structured as a traditional Islamic charitable association closely affiliated with the PJD. In the Moroccan context, such associations are rooted in a longstanding tradition of community-based social intervention. These interventions are typically embedded within local solidarity networks and guided by an Islamic ethical framework that integrates *zakāt* (the Islamic obligation of almsgiving) with practices of mutual aid and direct support for those in need²²⁸.

In 2005, Al-Amal transitioned to a non-governmental organization model, marking a significant shift not only in its legal status but also in its strategic and discursive positioning. This transformation reflects the broader influence of neoliberal governance in Morocco, which redefined the landscape of charitable associations by introducing demands for efficiency, transparency, and the capacity to secure external funding (Hibou and Bono 2016; Catusse 2011). Neoliberal governance thus compel NGOs to adopt corporate-like practices, prioritizing streamlined organizational structures, the use of digital technologies, and competition for limited resources. This phenomenon, known as “NGOization”, emerges as a process through which local associations are driven to adopt the models, practices, and operational frameworks typical of global NGOs and Western international institutions in order to gain access to financial and material resources (Leichtman 2022). Within this context, Al-Amal has leveraged its online presence to expand its reach and redefine its role. What was once a local intermediary for charitable activities has transformed into a key player competing at an international level for access to funding programs, adapting to the pressures and expectations of the global development sector²²⁹.

²²⁷ For an overview of the NGO Al-Amal, see Introduction, III.I.

²²⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the transformations of Al-Amal's charitable structure, see Part 3, especially chapters 8 and 9.

²²⁹ Al-Amal's funding and management model is extensively examined in Part 3, chapter 8 and 9.

The Internet has played a pivotal role in the legitimization and transformation of Al-Amal. The creation of a blog, followed by the launch of a Facebook page, was not merely an adaptation to new technologies but marked a significant step in building a professional and globalized image for the NGO. Through the digitalization of its activities, Al-Amal has successfully aligned itself with the criteria favored by international donors, who often prioritize organizations that demonstrate transparency and measurable impact (Baron and Hattab-Christmann 2005). Digital platforms have also enabled Al-Amal to continue essential activities, such as fundraising and project management, during the lockdown period, effectively transforming these virtual spaces into tools for maintaining connections with donors. However, this shift is not neutral: it reflects a broader market-driven logic that managerializes community engagement, reshaping organizations like Al-Amal into service providers rather than community-based institutions (Bono 2010a). In the case of Al-Amal, this transformation is particularly evident in its strategic use of the Internet to position itself as an organization adhering to principles of efficiency, carefully crafted to meet the expectations of both national and international donors²³⁰.

The introduction of digital tools has enabled Al-Amal to adapt to the globalized system of development governance, redefining its relationship with donors. It is no longer merely about maintaining direct contact with a local community but about entering a global market of solidarity, where online visibility, the ability to document and promote achievements, and compliance with international models of community engagement become decisive factors for the organization's survival and success. This shift underscores how neoliberal social policies have not only reshaped the field of social action but also established the basis for a new form of legitimization in community engagement. Central to this transformation are two interrelated dynamics: the professionalization of charitable work, on the side of volunteers and organizations (Collovald 2002), and the emphasis on integrating individuals into the market economy by demonstrating personal responsibility in overcoming issues such as unemployment and poverty—problems that are redefined as “social dysfunctions” rather than structural inequalities, on the sides of beneficiaries (Bono 2010a, 2). This dual focus reflects a broader neoliberal logic that shifts the burden of addressing systemic challenges onto individuals while reshaping community engagement into a market-oriented model.

Part 2 examines the construction of power in Morocco through the consolidation of a specific normative framework, which I refer to as Moroccan Islam. This framework was

²³⁰ Al-Amal's uses of social media is extensively analyzed in Part 3.

shaped by several key dynamics: the assertion of an ethno-linguistic and cultural unity rooted in the colonial and nationalist periods; the construction of a national identity anchored in the tripartite authority of the monarchy, which functions as a political authority, a religious leader, and the guarantor of the country's territorial integrity; and the dissemination of a narrative of power that permeates a public sphere carefully monitored by the regime and fortified by the forces that sustain it. Within this framework, Islam-oriented social actors do not operate in direct opposition to the regime but rather engage in continuous negotiation, a process that will be explored further in Part 3. As I demonstrate, the advent of the Internet has not accelerated democratization in Morocco. Instead, it has created new spaces of mediation where power is expressed, negotiated, and occasionally contested. To understand the dynamics of these spaces, it is crucial to examine how individuals access and navigate them, what discourses emerge within them, and how these discourses shape their self-perception as social actors. Part 3 of the thesis presents the ethnographic findings from the NEThnography conducted among Islam-oriented groups active both online and offline. Through this analysis, the following chapters seek to answer critical questions: How is power negotiated within these hybrid spaces? How do the discourses and practices of social actors contribute to either redefining or reinforcing power dynamics? The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these interconnected and overlapping spaces serve as arenas for negotiation, confrontation, and the production of new forms of political and social mediation.

PART 3

BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE POWER CONSTRUCTION WITHIN ISLAM-ORIENTED HYBRID CONTEXTS



Cov. 4 Seminar held by the Women's and Family Affairs Unit. At the back of the room, a participant shares photos of the seminar on social media. Photo by Eleonora Landucci (Fnideq, May 23, 2022).

#in_the_name_of_Allah_the_Most_Gracious_the_Most_Merciful
(Facebook's hashtag)

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, scholarly literature examining the impact of “new media” on political development in the MENA region has adopted various analytical perspectives regarding social media: some consider them as “tools” (Khamis 2013), others as a “distinct culture” (Turkle 1995), while others as a specific place (Benedikt 1991). These approaches suggest that social media are distinct from, or even in contrast with, “real life”. Underlying these interpretations is the notion that social networks essentially function as tools to be deployed or as spaces to be invested in, distinct from offline public or private spaces. In the decade that followed the Arab Spring, digital interfaces, devices, and infrastructures have expanded significantly in the MENA region as in the rest of the world (B. Zaid and Ibahrine 2011; Sassi and Goaid 2013). The widespread use and affordability of mobile devices have facilitated a more convenient and dynamic Internet access, seamlessly integrating it into numerous outdoor and daily routines (Bahrini and Qaffas 2019). This expansion has reached a point where sustaining the disconnection or the separation between physical and digital realms is no longer possible.

Research findings on digital media and human socialization have demonstrated that the frequent oscillation between offline and online spheres contributes to the creation of new hybrid contexts of interaction (de Souza e Silva 2006). By applying the paradigm of hybridization to the formation of the public sphere in the Arab world, it can be argued that the convergence of different communicative models and spaces of interaction has significantly reshaped the public space of communication and action. This hypothesis is advanced by scholars of the “Arab public sphere” theory, who argue that the interplay between mainstream and new media, alongside the interaction between institutionalized forms of public participation and emerging online practices, has resulted in a more fluid and dynamic public sphere (Gerbaudo 2015; Lynch 2006; Eickelman and Anderson 2003). While I concur with

this perspective²³¹, I argue that its limitations lie in the lack of contextualized analyses that adequately capture the nuanced development of the public sphere in various Arab contexts, leaving critical aspects of local realities underexplored (Mermier 2009).

In Morocco, these transformations have been analyzed in depth by sociolinguistics, which has focused on new discursive forms and the redefinition and legitimization of languages such as Darija and Tamazight (Caubet 2018; Ziamari et al. 2018; Benítez Fernández et al. 2013; Caubet and Miller 2016). However, less attention has been given to how this hybridization contributes to the restructuring of subjectivities, and how these subjectivities, in turn, redefine or reinforce the construction of institutional power in Morocco. In the Moroccan context, where power is exercised through the formation of a collective identity that encompasses religious, political, and socio-cultural dimensions²³², this hybridization may offer Islam-oriented groups the opportunity to explore new social and spatial contexts, foster new forms of interaction, and adopt novel modes of participation as social actors. The primary focus of this part will be an ethnographic investigation of Islam-oriented hybrid contexts, exploring if and how these contexts influence the formation of subjectivity.

This exploration unfolds through three main lines of inquiry. The first focuses on the impact of hybridization within the socio-spatial contexts of Islam-oriented groups: Can we truly speak of hybrid Islam-oriented groups, or should hybridization be understood as a defining feature of specific interactions, spaces, and discourses related to these groups? The second line of inquiry delves into the process of resemiotization within the discourses and practices of these groups in hybrid contexts: To what extent does hybridization shape interactions that continuously oscillate between different systems of symbols and meanings? The third line of inquiry examines how the ongoing movement between offline and online spheres affect how individuals see themselves and within their communities: How processes of hybridization and resemiotization interact with the formation of subjectivities associated with Islam-oriented contexts in Morocco? And how do various aspects of identity such as gender, class, and origins, intersect and interact within the construction of the self?

To explore these questions, I conducted fieldwork examining both offline and online spaces, practices, and discourses of three Islam-oriented groups: the women-founded Islamic NGO Al-Amal, the “progressive Islamist” student union OREMA, and the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq. As outlined in the Introduction, the groups examined here present an approach

²³¹ For an analysis on the “Arab public sphere”, see Part 2, 6.1.

²³² For an analysis of the construction of power in Morocco through the formation of a specific national identity, see chapter 5.

to Islam that is understood not only as a religion but most of all as societal project within the normative framework of Moroccan Islam²³³. In the following pages, I aim to explore how Islam-oriented groups form their subjectivities in hybrid socio-spatial contexts and how these formations might reshape or reinforce the existing power dynamics in Morocco.

To support this, three key arguments are presented. First, the proliferation of digital technologies and devices—due to increasing accessibility, affordability, and technological advancements—has resulted in the hybridization of online and offline spheres, which Islam-oriented groups actively navigate. Second, these socio-spatial contexts generate a process of resemiotization, where symbols and meanings are continuously reinterpreted and reshaped by the actors' discourses and actions. In turn, this process of resemiotization influences the very formation of these socio-spatial contexts, creating a cycle of mutual shaping between meaning and environment. Third, phenomena of hybridization and resemiotization, when analyzed in relation to factors such as gender, class, and generation, provide important insights into how individuals within Islam-oriented groups construct and perceive themselves as social subjects. The arguments in this part of the thesis draw on qualitative and quantitative data from online and offline fieldwork, mainly conducted between 2020 and 2022, with additional data from 2016 to 2018. About one-third of this data is presented in the following chapters²³⁴.

Thus, the third part of this thesis is organized in three chapters. In chapter 7, I examine the process of hybridization, which blurs the boundaries between online and offline spaces within Islam-oriented groups. Through quantitative and qualitative data, I seek to explain how, why, and which different consequences this hybridization has for these groups. Chapter 8 explores how this hybridization facilitates interactions that continuously shift between different systems of symbols and meanings: I refer to this process as “resemiotization”, a concept borrowed from the field of linguistics and semiotics. In chapter 9, I examine the construction of subjectivity among Islam-oriented individuals, highlighting how processes of hybridization and resemiotization contribute to the reconfiguration of the self. However, this reconfiguration must be understood in the light of the intersection of various factors, such as gender, class, and generation.

²³³ For a description of the Islam-oriented groups examined in this thesis, see Introduction, II.I and III. For an analysis of Moroccan Islam as normative framework in Morocco, see chapter 5.

²³⁴ For further details on the duration of fieldwork, see Introduction, III.I.

ON HYBRIDIZATION



Fig. 12 Workshop at Al-Amal Training center in Touilaa, Eastern neighborhood of Tétouan. Photo by Eleonora Landucci, March 2022. © Eleonora Landucci

“The “awareness workshop” titled “On the danger of the screen for children” takes place in one of the training centers of the NGO Al-Amal (fig. 12). Approximately fifteen women, accompanied by about ten children aged 10 to 16, who are either the sons and daughters or grandchildren of the attending women, participate in the session. After an introduction about the organization and the workshop’s objectives, Farida, the NGO’s vice-president and acting as the facilitator, informs the participants that the workshop is being live streamed on the conferencing platform Zoom. She explains that this decision aims to facilitate “virtual” participation for those unable to attend physically, whether due to health, financial, or time constraints. She also points out how the COVID lockdown “teaches us the positive aspects of the Internet”—Al-Amal has indeed heavily relied on digital media during the pandemic to maintain some of its activities. Farida announces that the Zoom participants can comment and ask questions in the platform’s chat. She then opens her slide presentation, both sharing it on Zoom and projecting it onto a large white screen mounted on the wall. Meanwhile, Oumaima, one of the NGO’s employees

and teacher, takes on the role of moderator from behind her computer, occasionally pausing the workshop to convey the few comments and questions received on Zoom”.

This excerpt from a field journal dated March 2022 captures a recurring observation in the field: the intertwining of online and offline spaces, activities, and discourses within Islam-oriented groups. This back-and-forth dynamic was consistently observed in certain groups and among certain participants, while being more sporadic in others, and sometimes not occurring smoothly. An additional layer emphasized in the fieldwork excerpt is the pandemic, which served as a key temporal and spatial turning point in how individuals perceived this ongoing online-offline flow²³⁵. As will be demonstrated in the following pages, the pandemic created a clear “before and after” in the actions, reactions, and perceptions of Islam-oriented groups. Finally, this excerpt raises a crucial question: the individuals participating in the workshop via Zoom were neither physically present in the room with the other participants, nor did they seem to fully inhabit the physical spaces from which they are connecting to Zoom via their devices. Where exactly were they located?

While phrases like “between online and offline” or “on-screen and in-person” were commonly used by my interlocutors and myself in our daily life during the pandemic, this dichotomy did not align with the reality observed in the field, nor with my personal experiences. During the lockdown, the boundaries between offline and online experiences became increasingly blurred. However, these experiences were often described as opposing each other, even though this opposition was not actually *lived*. In attempting to accurately describe this condition and noticing that no emic term was emerging from the field, I sought alternative ways of naming it. This is when I encountered the term “hybrid”. Initially used in fields like chemistry, biology, and mechanics to describe the combination of distinct elements or components from different sources²³⁶, “hybrid” has since been widely adopted in the literature on digital media and their impact on social life. In this context, the term refers to spaces of interaction where online and offline spheres intersect, as well as the simultaneous presence of actors in both realms, such as in augmented reality or gaming environments (Miller et al. 2019; Bekirov and Vaillancourt 2023; de Souza e Silva and Glover-Rijkse 2020). In this chapter, I will examine how hybridization creates new spatial forms of sociality. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from the field, I will explore how these hybrid spaces emerge and assess their broader social and spatial impacts.

²³⁵ As emphasized in the Introduction and Part 1, this turning point also influenced the methodological, epistemological, and ethical foundations of this research.

²³⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1998), s.v. “hybrid”.

7.1 *Mapping Online and Offline Spaces of Islam-oriented Groups*

As outlined in the Introduction, the Islam-oriented groups examined in this thesis are based in Morocco's northern region of Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima between the urban center of Tétouan and the coastal cities of Martil, M'diq, and Fnideq²³⁷. While their activities, networks, and relationships are evidently shaped by the local territory and its historical context, it would be inaccurate to define these groups only by their geographical location. OREMA and the ulema of M'diq, for instance, operate within hierarchical frameworks that are reflective of broader Moroccan contexts. OREMA, as the student union faction of the national UNEM, and the ulema of M'diq, as the local council of a national religious institution, are embedded in larger organizational structures that guide their operations, strategies, and interactions. In contrast, Al-Amal operates within a different logic. Although founded in Tétouan by women deeply embedded in the local social fabric and focused on territorially anchored initiatives, the NGO aligns with governance models typical of women's community engagement that have been implemented in Morocco since the 1990s. This is evidenced by the data from other regions of Morocco, as well as broader research across Global South countries, which reflect similar patterns (Berriane 2013; Bono 2010a; Allal 2007).

In addition to their offline activities, these groups maintain varying levels of engagement on social media, each adopting different approaches to establish their digital presence. As described in the Introduction, although these Islam-oriented groups maintain a presence across various social media platforms, their primary activity is on Facebook, where most of my fieldwork was concentrated. It is important to emphasize that all these groups initially emerged in offline contexts and later chose to expand into online platforms as part of their evolving strategies. The decision to enhance their online visibility was particularly influenced by the pandemic and post-pandemic context, where the shift to digital spaces became essential for maintaining engagement and outreach. In the following pages, I aim to demonstrate how these groups operate within and navigate the interplay between offline and online spaces. While each group displays distinct modes of interaction, common patterns emerge in the way they integrate their online and offline activities. The ethnographic mapping presented in this subchapter will explore the strategies each group adopts to navigate both contexts.

²³⁷ For a map of the locations of the three Islam-oriented groups within the Tétouan region, see Appendix 11 and 12.

7.1.1 *Offline Spaces*

The Community Centers of NGO Al-Amal

Al-Amal is one of the most prominent Islamic community engagement NGOs in the Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima region, with several ongoing projects and collaborations. Given the wide range of its activities, the NGO operates out of three main facilities and hosts events in various other venues²³⁸. The historic headquarters, Bab Saïda, is housed in an old riad owned by Aisha's family—the 45-year-old former president of the NGO—and is located near one of the northeastern gates of Tétouan's medina. This area underwent significant gentrification in the 1980s as the city expanded, displacing poorer populations to the outskirts²³⁹. Bab Saïda primarily serves administrative functions but also hosts Quran reading and learning courses for women. The riad features a central patio with semi-open rooms for Quran reading and learning classes, while the mezzanine holds the office of Meryam, the NGO's secretary and social media manager. The presidency office on the first floor, previously held by Aisha until August 2022, has been led by the new president Farida since the end of that same year.

The other two centers are located half a kilometer apart in the Touilaa neighborhood, which developed during the city's expansion in the 1960s and 1970s²⁴⁰. These two centers, larger and more modern than Bab Saïda, host a variety of activities, including legal and social support for women and children, professional training for young adults, and extracurricular programs for children and adolescents. The Al-Amal Center for Family Orientation (hereafter CFO), which provides legal and social support for women and children victims of domestic violence, occupies a two-story apartment. The ground floor has three waiting rooms, equipped with toys for small children, while the first floor includes three meeting rooms and the office of a lawyer who collaborates with the NGO. The Al-Amal Center for Social Development (hereafter CSD), built in 2009, underwent major renovations and expansion in 2021 and 2022,

²³⁸ For a map of Al-Amal's centers, see Appendix 11.

²³⁹ At the time of my field research, the Bab Saïda neighborhood was predominantly a middle-class residential zone and a growing tourist hub, with BnBs and guesthouses attracting visitors in search of an authentic "Paloma Blanca" experience—a nickname for Tétouan derived from its iconic whitewashed buildings. However, this appeal also flirts with a subtle sense of Spanish colonial nostalgia.

²⁴⁰ At the time of my field research, Touilaa was a popular neighborhood undergoing urban renewal, particularly along the main roads connecting the outskirts to the city center. New apartment buildings were under construction, displaying advertisements in French and Spanish, likely aimed at attracting foreign clients or Moroccan diaspora drawn by the low prices and the neighborhood's transformation, conveniently located between the city center and the coast.

funded by a successful crowdfunding campaign²⁴¹. Housed in a larger, modern facility spanning two floors (with a third floor under construction), the ground floor features a gym, changing rooms, and workshop spaces for children. The first floor includes training classrooms, two equipped with kitchens, and another designed as a hairdressing salon.

The organization of Al-Amal's centers, as well as the staff involved and the beneficiaries they serve, is closely tied to the diversity of services and activities offered by the NGO. Bab Saïda, accessible only to the president and board members, opens to public once a week, on Fridays, for Quran reading and learning courses. These women-only sessions last a few hours, with an average attendance of 10 women. The course runs year-round, except during Ramadan, when it is paused to honor the holy month and accommodate other NGO activities. The CFO operates on an appointment basis. A lawyer working on commission for the NGO manages these cases, with support from two NGO volunteers who assist the beneficiaries during their visits. The CSD is the most active center, with 50 to 100 participants, including children, teenagers, and young adults, attending courses and training sessions two to three times a week during the school year. The gym offers boxing and fitness classes for children and teens, while the center provides after-school programs led by teachers employed by the NGO, along with volunteer support. Additionally, the center features training facilities for courses in cooking, hairdressing, and plumbing, all developed through a wide range of local, national, and international funding²⁴².

OREMA Union Group and the University Enclosure

A significant portion of OREMA's activities takes place at Abdelmalek Essaâdi University (AEU), split between two campuses: the Faculty of Sciences, located in the Mhannesh district just south of Tétouan's medina, and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, situated in the coastal city of Martil (east of Tétouan)²⁴³. Both campuses are accessible via entrances monitored by security personnel and are enclosed by walls and grids that separate them from the surrounding neighborhoods. Together, the two campuses comprise approximately forty buildings, connected by well-organized networks of pedestrian pathways, gardens, and small squares. These facilities support daily university life, including academic and administrative buildings (general secretariat, presidency, and dean's office), two libraries, four prayer rooms, two cafeterias, and a sports field.

²⁴¹ The details and implications of this crowdfunding will be analyzed in 7.2.1.

²⁴² For an in-depth analysis, see 7.2.1 and 9.2.1.

²⁴³ For a map of OREMA locations, see Appendix 11.

Built in 1982, the Faculty of Sciences campus reflects the urban expansion policies of the 1980s in Tétouan. In this sense, the decision to locate the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences 9 km to the east, in Martil, can be seen as a broader plan to expand Tétouan's coastal areas, using the university as a driver for economic development and urban renewal²⁴⁴. This relocation not only supports economic objectives but also reflects a political agenda aimed at segregating university spaces from city centers. This agenda, largely promoted during the reign of Hassan II between the 1970s and 1990s, sought to control the student population, which had become a hub for anti-regime student unionism. This period notably coincided with the dissolution of the UNEM student union (from 1973 to 1979) which had played a central role in political protests against the regime (Vermeren 2016)²⁴⁵.

Despite the official end of the political conflict between UNEM and the state, its effects continue to shape the spatial dynamics of OREMA's activities. While forming student unions is no longer legally prohibited, union factions remain under scrutiny due to their historical association with UNEM, which once defied the king's authority (Landucci 2019). This suspicion has led to an unofficial restriction on student union activities in public spaces, though they are tolerated if they remain within the university grounds. Hence, for the union groups, the campus provides not only a space for action but also the main platform for visibility among their primary audience—the students. In this sense, student union activists frequently liken the campus to an “arena” or “square” (*sāḥa*), where different factions compete for the most prominent spots to display their posters, host meetings, and organize events throughout the academic year (Ibid. 2019).

Thus, the visibility of student union groups on campus is maintained through the wide range of activities they carry out. OREMA is the dominant faction both nationally and in Tétouan, making it a highly visible group within the university. This prominence is evident in the numerous events it organizes, which play a significant role in shaping daily campus life. OREMA's initiatives can be categorized into two main types: daily tasks and specific actions throughout the year. Daily tasks primarily involve mediating between students and professors or assisting with administrative processes. Specific actions are focused on two key areas: recruitment and educational and cultural engagement. These activities are concentrated during pivotal times in the academic calendar, particularly at the beginning and end of each semester.

²⁴⁴ As students sought accommodation in Martils area, rental markets flourished, and businesses catering to university needs, such as bookstores, copy shops, and stationery stores, rapidly emerged to support the growing academic community. This influx of students and the services created around the university have transformed Martil from a seasonal tourist destination to a more diversified, year-round economy.

²⁴⁵ For further details about the UNEM, see Introduction, III.I.

During the first semester, OREMA activists, alongside other union groups, set up booths at the university entrance to welcome new students. At the end of the second semester, they assist students in preparing for final exams by organizing study groups. Finally, specific cultural initiatives are held throughout the year, such as the “internal forums” (*al-muntada al-dākhilī*)²⁴⁶.

The Mosque and the Ulema Council

Located in the northern districts of the coastal town of M'diq, 14 km north-east of Tétouan, the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq prefecture is set in a quiet, predominantly residential and middle-class area with many vacation houses. The neighborhood is also known for its mosque, inaugurated in 2008 and fully funded by Mohammed VI's personal fund²⁴⁷. The king's financial support for this mosque, which bears his name, is not an isolated case: in M'diq, a town of about 56,000 inhabitants, there are 14 mosques, six of which were inaugurated in 2008 with the king's funds or those of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs—In Tétouan, a city of about 390,000 inhabitants, there are 10 mosques²⁴⁸. The disproportionate construction of M'diq's mosques in relation to the population²⁴⁹ mirrors the broader religious reform initiated in 2006, aiming at strengthening the monarchy's religious authority through the expansion of religious institutions and worship practices, particularly in smaller urban centers and rural areas²⁵⁰. Among the outcomes of this reform is that local ulema councils are directly appointed by the Supreme Council of Ulema, which is responsible for overseeing religious scholars and managing religious practices throughout the country, chaired by the king. Additionally, like all other religious facilities in Morocco, the building housing the local councils and the mosques are owned by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, whose minister is appointed directly by the king.

The M'diq Council building consists of three floors. The first floor features a conference hall for up to 60 people, with a royal emblem and the inscription “Ulema Council of the Prefecture of M'diq-Fnideq” prominently displayed on the wall behind the speakers' table. The council's library, with about twenty shelves of books, lines the walls of the hall. On the second floor, the council meeting room is furnished with white leather sofas and a dark wooden oval

²⁴⁶ I delve into the ethnographic analysis of OREMA's forums in 7.2.2 and 9.2.2.

²⁴⁷ For a cartography of the ulema council and mosques in M'diq, see in Appendix 12.

²⁴⁸ Demographic data from the latest general census conducted in Morocco, dating back to 2014; see Haut-commissariat au Plan. “Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat de 2014”. Royaume du Maroc, Haut-commissariat au Plan, Direction de la Statistique, Division du Recensement de la population et de l'État civil, 2014. https://www.hcp.ma/downloads/RGPH-2014_t17441.html.

²⁴⁹ In M'diq, there is one mosque for every 4,000 inhabitants, while in Tétouan, there is one mosque for every 39,000 inhabitants.

²⁵⁰ For an overview of religious reforms in Morocco, see Introduction, III.I and Part 2, 6.3.3.

table. This floor also houses the offices of Tariq, the 55-years-old president of the council, and Khaoula, the 27-year-old council secretary, as well as shared offices for other members. Here, designated space houses the council's Women's and Family Affairs Unit (*khalīyya shu'ūn al-mra' wa-qaḍāyā al-'usra*), which focuses on women's education, family well-being, marital counseling, promoting Islamic values in the Moroccan family structure²⁵¹. An internal passage from the ground floor leads to the mosque's secondary entrance, which opens to the inner courtyard (*ṣahn*). The mosque, blending contemporary Islamic architecture with Moroccan Arab-Andalusian influences, features the region's characteristic white and blue colors. Spanning 3,000 square meters, it can hold up to 1,600 worshippers, including a women's prayer hall for 600 people. The mosque also includes an apartment for the imam and his family.

The mosque and the council host ulema's main activities: issuing fatwas, training imams, and organizing conferences and seminars to accomplish the *tablīgh* ("propagation"), the Islamic mission of spreading the words of the Quran and other sacred texts²⁵². Imam training takes place in the council's conference hall or in the mosque, and many ulema, who are often university lecturers, also contribute to Quranic education in local schools across M'diq, Fnideq, and Tétouan. However, despite many scholars being university professors, ulema-led events at universities are less common. The council also organizes cultural events, such as conferences and seminars, primarily held in the conference hall. Besides religious worship, larger events, like Quran recitation competitions, may take place in the mosque. In addition to activities at the mosque and council, the ulema participate in events at regional schools and they are often present in local and regional radio and television.

7.1.2 Online Spaces

Al-Amal Facebook Page

Al-Amal joined Facebook in May 2014²⁵³. By 2022, the Facebook page had 17,000 likes and 18,000 followers²⁵⁴, with most growth occurring in 2020 when Meryam, the secretary, pursuing at that time a master's in digital communication at the University of Tétouan, took charge of the NGO's digital communication²⁵⁵. This shift in Al-Amal's communication strategy

²⁵¹ For further details about the unit, see Introduction, III.I.

²⁵² For further details about the *tablīgh* and its standardization, see Part 3, 9.2.3.

²⁵³ Al-Amal Facebook page, last access, December 2022, https://www.facebook.com/alamaltetouan92/?ref=page_internal. Al-Amal has also a web page, opened in 2014, and an Instagram page, opened in 2020.

²⁵⁴ For a chart of followers and likes of Islam-oriented Facebook pages, see Appendix 15.

²⁵⁵ Meryam's life story is outlined in chapter 9.

coincided also with a change in the NGO's leadership, reflecting a broader national political shift. At the end of 2022, following a prolonged internal conflict with former president Aisha, a new board and a new president, 51-year-old Farida, were elected. Aisha's decline in popularity within the NGO was largely shaped by the PJD's defeat in the 2021 national elections. As an active member of the PJD in Tétouan, Aisha had served as the city's vice president from 2015 to 2021, and the party's political downfall directly impacted her standing both within the organization and the broader political scene. As for Farida, though she is not officially affiliated with any political party, she aligns herself with the royalist-leaning Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). Under her leadership, Al-Amal has shifted away from the PJD's political influence, steering the organization towards a more monarchy-oriented governance model. This shift is also evident in the NGO's revamped digital presence, as reflected in the updated branding on its Facebook page.

The Al-Amal Facebook page has shown significant variations in post frequency over the years. During the pandemic, the page maintained an average of 1.5 posts per day, a notable increase from the 0.5 posts per day in 2019²⁵⁶. This was driven by the board's choice to stay connected with the NGO's donors and beneficiaries during lockdown. However, between 2021 and 2022, the frequency of exclusive Facebook posts dropped to 0.4 posts per day as Meryam focused more on Instagram. After the pandemic, Al-Amal primarily uses Instagram, taking advantage of cross-posting capabilities with Facebook²⁵⁷, and no longer creates original content specifically for this platform. However, the NGO still utilizes Facebook for its live videos; these live videos were particularly important during the pandemic when face-to-face meetings were limited²⁵⁸.

The page features the typical layout, with a cover image and profile picture conveying the page's identity²⁵⁹. Next to the profile picture is the page's name in Arabic (*jami'iyā al-'amal al-nisā'iyā*). The cover image, designed by Meryam, has a professional look with a honeycomb layout featuring images of a chef, a woman in hijab with a child, a boy dressed as a superhero, and a young man with a book. Beside these images, a phrase reads: "Our message: the rehabilitation of individuals educationally, professionally, and legally, to achieve community development". As a profile picture, the NGO's logo features a more stylized and dynamic

²⁵⁶ Quantitative web scraping study conducted on Al-Amal Facebook page from January 2019 to December 2022. See dataset and chart in Appendix 14.

²⁵⁷ This feature was made possible by Facebook's acquisition of Instagram in 2012 and completed in 2020, to enhance cross-platform integration and reach a broader audience.

²⁵⁸ I discuss live-streamed videos in 7.2 and 7.3.

²⁵⁹ Last connection, December 2022.

design: it retains elements of the old one, such as the rising sun, but includes three abstract human figures of different colors and sizes. Farida explains that the figures can represent either a mother with her children or the Islamic family, with the father in the forefront. When I point out that these figures are also present in the OREMA logo, the Islamist student union, Farida responds, “Ultimately, even though we act in different ways, we share the same Islamic values”.

Below the cover image, on the left, the column detailing the NGO’s description is filled with information on location, contacts, and website, along with a quote summarizing its mission and values: “Al-Amal Women’s NGO serving children, women, and families”. To the right, the post column displays the latest posts in reverse chronological order, with a video message from the new president Farida, pinned at the top. This video contains, according to the post description, an “#Interview with the legitimate president of #Al_Amal_women’s_association, Prof. Farida, on the causes and origins of the dispute with the former president, Ms. Aisha, who was removed from the NGO”. Created by Meryam, the video, a mix between audio-visual, text, and images, explains the conflict with former president Aisha and justifies the NGO’s new directions. Below the video, a message from the page, written by Meryam, provides further details on the leadership change and it is followed by around 500 user comments giving blessing or asking for further details.

OREMA Facebook Page

The OREMA Tétouan²⁶⁰ has been on Facebook since January 2010²⁶¹, the same year the union’s national webpage was launched, and currently has 7,000 likes and 10,000 followers²⁶². In 2016-2017 and 2020, the page saw a significant increase in followers, but Fatima, the 21-years-old page administrator and a third-year biology student at Tétouan, does not know the exact reason apart from the pandemic²⁶³. Unlike Meryam, Fatima lacks formal training in digital communication but is an active OREMA member and has managed the Facebook page since late 2021, when she started her third year of bachelor’s studies. Having joined OREMA in her

²⁶⁰ I will use OREMA to refer to the Tétouan section of the student union and OREMA national or OREMA followed by the city name to refer to the national section or other city sections.

²⁶¹ OREMA’s Facebook page, last access, December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/oremametouan/>. After Facebook, OREMA expanded its social media presence with YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.

²⁶² See the chart of followers and likes of Islam-oriented Facebook pages in Appendix 15.

²⁶³ A possible hypothesis could link OREMA’s increased digital activity to its involvement in key events, such as the Rif protests (2016-2017) and the opposition to Morocco’s lockdown in 2020. The Rif protests in the Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima region saw OREMA’s indirect support for the rallies, while in 2020, Islamist factions, including elements within the OREMA national, opposed the government’s lockdown measures, possibly driving greater online interest for OREMA.

first year after discovering the union during university orientation days, Fatima can manage the Facebook page due to three years of activism, her campus contacts, and the trust of the group's leaders.

Like Al-Amal, OREMA also had to improve its social media communication strategies. However, this change was driven not by a sudden external event like the pandemic or a marketing strategy but by growing demand from the student population, all young adults aged 20 to 30. This demand arose from the increasing use of Facebook in the 2010s, which, unlike forums and blogs, offers real-time interaction, a broader reach, and a user-friendly interface for both personal and group interactions (Faizi, Afia, and Chiheb 2014). University students began using Facebook more frequently to access useful information about university life (such as exam schedules and class schedule changes), exchange information (e.g., announcements of flats or rooms for rent) and receive real-time notifications about university (for example, cultural and political initiatives on campus, or urgent alerts). In OREMA, this increasing use is evidenced by the creation of three Facebook groups between 2013 and 2015, which serve as discussion forums where open conversation on various topics is moderated by administrators²⁶⁴.

In this sense, OREMA's Facebook page functions not only as a platform for presenting the union group but also as a tool for educational and cultural engagement, addressing the immediate needs of its audience—the students. This is evident in the fluctuating frequency and type of posts shared by OREMA before, during, and after the pandemic. In 2019, the group posted almost daily, but this frequency slightly decreased during the pandemic, averaging 0.5 posts per day. However, in 2021 and 2022, activity surged to an average of 1.8 posts per day²⁶⁵. During the pandemic, OREMA Tétouan adapted by incorporating live videos to maintain contact with students and continue union activities despite social restrictions, demonstrating an effective response to the circumstances. The decrease in regular posts and the increase in live video use suggest that OREMA prioritized offering students the cultural events typically held on campus, rather than standard posts, which might have drawn less attention due to the pandemic-driven surge in live-streamed content²⁶⁶. The use of live videos

²⁶⁴ The groups “Campaign ‘we succeed with honor’ – students of the faculty of sciences” and “Campaign ‘we succeed with honor’ – students of the faculties of Martil”, opened in 2013, facilitate information exchange about mid-term and final exams for the students of the Faculty of Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities. The group “Organization of Student Renewal, Section of Tétouan”, created in 2015, allows open discussion on issues related to OREMA.

²⁶⁵ Quantitative web scraping study conducted on OREMA Facebook page from January 2019 to December 2022. See dataset and chart in Appendix 14.

²⁶⁶ I discuss this point in 7.2.2, 8.2.3, and 9.2.2.

not only kept the student community engaged but also facilitated real-time interaction and updates, strengthening the group's presence and responsiveness during these challenging times.

The layout of OREMA's Facebook page reflects its dual purpose of promoting its activities both as a tool for outreach and as a form of self-representation. This intention is evident in the page's cover image, which sponsors the group's last internal forum (*al-muntada al-dākhilī*) with an image illustrating a conference room filled with attendees. At the top, the title in Arabic reads, "12th Internal Forum for Communication and Effectiveness"²⁶⁷. At the bottom of the cover, the theme of the meeting says, "The man of today: between cultural specificity and human commonality". On the left is a photo and name in Arabic and Latin of politician and writer Roger Garaudy, a figure of the French resistance, known for his conversion to Islam and his Holocaust denial theses. The OREMA logo is at the top right, alongside the name of the group in Arabic, French, and Tamazight. The logo also serves as the profile picture: within a white circle, an orange, stylized figure with raised arms is depicted, while a green crescent moon at the bottom right symbolizes the group's Islamic orientation. Below the logo, the name of the group is written in both Arabic and French.

Below the cover image, on the left, the column detailing the group's description is filled with information on location, contacts, and website. In addition to the group's introductory phrase, which reads, "A Moroccan civil youth student framework aimed at spreading the values of the call (*da'wa*), knowledge (*ma'rifa*), and reform (*iṣlāh*) in the student environment", the "about" section of the page presents a detailed text elaborating on the group's values, objectives, vision, and mission, which is the same text presented in the web page of OREMA national. On the right, the post column displays the latest updates in reverse chronological order, with a pinned post at the top to highlight specific content that changes regularly. In the case of OREMA, these are multiple posts promoting specific initiatives, for example a post advertising the registration form for OREMA membership and affiliation, with questions like, "What are your specific interests you want to invest in within the group?". This post is the same for all sections, indicating that OREMA's communication is centralized²⁶⁸, even though the questionnaire directs to the specific Tétouan section.

²⁶⁷ Last connection, December 2022.

²⁶⁸ On OREMA's centralized practices of communication and interaction, see subchapters 7.3 and 8.2.

Ulema Facebook Page

The Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq first launched a Facebook profile in May 2020, followed by a Facebook page in April 2021²⁶⁹. Tariq, the council's president, initially created the profile to promote a WhatsApp group and YouTube channel²⁷⁰ that had been set up during the pandemic to maintain communication with the faithful. As Tariq explains, smartphones during lockdown provided “the quickest, easiest, and cheapest way for many brothers and sisters” to receive religious guidance, especially compared to other devices, such as radio, television or computer. This allowed the ulema to continue providing teachings and advice during the lockdown, despite restrictions on in-person gatherings. As the Facebook profile grew in popularity during the pandemic, Tariq, no longer wanting to manage it alone, asked Khaoula, the council's secretary, to create a dedicated Facebook page to reach a broader audience. Tariq emphasizes that this decision was also ideological: “We use our websites to signal our commitment to technological development and modernity in spreading Islamic values, following the recommendations of His Majesty Mohammed VI, may Allah assist him”. The Facebook page quickly gained popularity, amassing 8,600 likes and 12,000 followers²⁷¹.

At its launch in 2020, the ulema's Facebook profile was highly active, averaging 3 posts per day. This activity dropped to 1.5 posts per day on the Facebook page in 2021 and further declined to 0.9 posts in 2022, though it spiked to 2 posts per day during Ramadan²⁷². On the Facebook profile, Tariq exclusively shared YouTube links to ulema seminars and other religious podcasts. However, on the Facebook page, managed by Khaoula, the production of YouTube and live videos significantly decreased, while posts featuring schedules of ulema activities, and especially photos of seminars, events, and mosque worship, increased. This shift in social media use sparked internal debate within the council. Some members supported the use of digital platforms, while others were opposed to broadcasting sacred spaces and moments online. Tariq emphasized that live videos were essential in keeping the faithful engaged during restrictions on in-person gatherings. However, concerns were raised about

²⁶⁹ The ulema's Facebook profile, last access, December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066505103729>

The ulema's Facebook page, last access, December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068791159551>.

²⁷⁰ The Ulema YouTube channel, last access, December 2022, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT2lyae_0SsHIFNi8N9Iu3A.

²⁷¹ For a chart of followers and likes of Islam-oriented Facebook pages, see Appendix 15.

²⁷² Quantitative web scraping study conducted on the ulema Facebook page from January 2019 to December 2022. See dataset and chart in Appendix 14.

whether sharing key religious events online diminished the personal and communal spiritual experience, leading to questions about how to balance accessibility with the sanctity of worship.

At its opening, the cover of the ulema's Facebook page echoed the layout of WhatsApp, displaying a simple image of the council's name in black Arabic script within a chat-style balloon. The actual cover, updated in 2022, reflects more the council's institutional identity²⁷³. With a background photo of the grand prayer hall of the M'diq mosque, the cover features a royal emblem at the center, accompanied by the inscription "The Kingdom of Morocco, the Supreme Council of Ulema, the General Secretariat, the Ulema Council of the Prefecture of M'diq-Fnideq". Positioned below at the center, the council's name is surrounded by two images showing the interior and exterior of the mosque. Additionally, the cover includes a shortened URL leading to the council's official Facebook profile. The updated profile image features a high-quality photo of the blue and white mosque in the coastal town of Fnideq²⁷⁴, which, like M'diq, is under the supervision of the same ulema council.

A general observation of the ulema's Facebook page shows that its potential is not fully exploited, with many sections left incomplete or unused compared to the previous two pages. The information section, for instance, provides only basic details such as service type ("public and government service"), address, contact number, and links to the YouTube channel and the WhatsApp group that has been deactivated in 2021, but whose link is still displayed. Even the introductory sentence, typically reflective of a page's aims or values, is merely a descriptive statement highlighting the page's dedication to the "scientific" (*al-'ilmiyya*) and "cultural" (*al-thaqāfiyya*) activities of the council. The page's limited functionality can be attributed in part to Khaoula's lack of experience in digital communication, as well as her demanding responsibilities as the council's secretary, which leave her with little time to dedicate to the platform. Additionally, some members of the council are hesitant to engage with social media, further limiting the page's potential. More importantly, however, this unconventional use of social media reflects a unique approach shaped by the council's specific context and its key actors, particularly Tariq. As we will explore in the following pages, this distinctive use of social media reveals deeper insights into the council's practices and the perspectives of its members.

²⁷³ Last connection, December 2022.

²⁷⁴ Fnideq, the last town before the border with the Spanish city of Ceuta features an impressive mosque built in 2011 on the city's cornice, visible even from the border Moroccan-Spanish border. It is Tariq who points out this detail to me, emphasizing how the view of the minaret holds special significance for the Muslims of Ceuta, a city over which Morocco claims territorial rights.

7.2 *Crossing Practices Between Offline and Online Spaces*

In the preceding pages, I divided the mapping of spaces into two distinct sections to provide readers with a clearer understanding of the online and offline environments of Islam-oriented groups; however, in the everyday lives of the groups, this separation does not exist. To fully understand this fluidity, a more in-depth analysis of the groups' activities is necessary. These groups engage in what I term "crossing practices" of online and offline spaces. In the following three sections, I will explore three key examples from the field, each focusing on distinct cases of crossing practices concerning dematerialization, digital mediation, and virtualization. Dematerialization refers to the process of converting physical objects or assets into digital formats, reducing the need for physical materials (Mitchell and Hansen 2010). Virtualization involves creating digital versions of physical systems, allowing users to interact with virtual representations of online resources or environments (S. Coleman and Collins 2006). Digital mediation is the use of digital technologies that mediate social and cultural exchanges to facilitate, influence, or reshape communication and interactions between individuals and groups (E. G. Coleman 2010). Together, these processes reflect how online tools and environments transform physical realities and social contexts. Although this approach may inadvertently reify these groups and reduce the complexity of their socio-cultural realities, it allows me to highlight specific social dynamics that will offer relevant insights to my research focus. The ethnographic findings presented here illustrate how these intersecting practices lead to varying degrees of spatial hybridization, a process further elaborated in subchapter 7.3.

7.2.1 *Islamic Crowdfunding: Dematerialization in Community Engagement*

As one of the largest Islamic NGOs in the Tétouan-Al Hoceima-Tanger prefecture, Al-Amal has implemented numerous projects funded by local, national, and international entities, encompassing both public and private sectors²⁷⁵. Al-Amal's funding system relies on a mix of public, private, national, and international resources. The organization receives funds from international organizations and NGOs that distribute resources based on the alignment of local projects with the goals of international development programs. Additionally, it secures funding from diverse sources, including state grants and contributions from regional entities,

²⁷⁵ According to the interviews, between 2020 and 2022, the NGO directed, co-directed, or collaborated on 7 projects and signed 4 partnerships.

donations, and volunteer efforts, as well as revenue generated from the sale of goods and services²⁷⁶.

Al-Amal's funding model relies on a combination of local, national, and international sources. Domestically, the NGO receives support from institutional bodies such as the Agency for the Promotion and Development of the North (APDN)²⁷⁷. These funds are often contingent on the NGO's close collaboration with local associations. As a result, Al-Amal works with a wide range of neighborhood associations, trade organizations, and cultural centers, ensuring broad-based community engagement. Internationally, Al-Amal benefits from grants provided by organizations like USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) or IOM (International Organization for Migration) programs, which focuses on grassroots initiatives for social empowerment and sustainable development. At the national level, Al-Amal receives support from the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a government program launched in 2005 by Mohammed VI. The INDH aims to combat poverty and promote socio-economic development, with a focus on empowering vulnerable groups like women and youth. Its primary efforts include supporting income-generating activities (AGR), funding micro-projects, and providing access to micro-credits to foster entrepreneurship in disadvantaged areas²⁷⁸.

Although these national and international programs aim to foster social and economic inclusion, numerous studies have shown that this multi-layered funding structure actually promotes decentralized, community-driven initiatives, while allowing the state to scale back its involvement in addressing structural issues (Hibou and Bono 2016; Catusse 2011). By shifting the responsibility for welfare provision from the state to civil society, these programs encourage associative activism to fill the gap traditionally occupied by formal labor markets (Bono 2010a; 2010b). Although this strategy may seem empowering for local actors, it ultimately depoliticizes social issues by shifting the focus to individual entrepreneurship and self-resilience. In doing so, these programs ultimately reinforce neoliberal principles that prioritize reducing the state's role as the guarantor of collective social and economic development (Bayat 2010). The dynamics described above are clear in the case of Al-Amal during the pandemic.

²⁷⁶ For an infographic of Al-Amal's funding structure, see Appendix 19.

²⁷⁷ The APDN was established in 1995 as the first local development agency in Morocco with financial autonomy. It is dedicated to promoting economic and social development in the northern regions of the country and focuses on fostering sustainable growth and reducing regional disparities through a range of development programs and strategic partnerships.

²⁷⁸ For further information on the INDH program and its impact on community engagement in Morocco, see Introduction, III.I.

To navigate this challenging period, Al-Amal turned to self-reliance and community-driven solutions, as state support proved too inconsistent to sustain the NGO. Aisha, president of the NGO at the time, recalls that Al-Amal managed to pay its workers (the four teachers and Meryam, the secretary) during the first few months of the pandemic. However, as the lockdown continued and state aid became increasingly insufficient, the organization, in Aisha's words, had to "find their own means to sustain themselves during the crisis". In response, Al-Amal began to rely more heavily on online platforms, drawing on the expertise of its younger members, including Meryam who was completing a master's degree in digital communication in the spring of 2020, and Kenza, Aisha's daughter, who already managed the organization's online communications. Meryam and Kenza enhanced Al-Amal's presence on Facebook by posting regularly and using both reels²⁷⁹ and live videos to keep users engaged with the NGO's page. It was during this time that Meryam proposed to Farida, Al-Amal's vice-president at that time, an unconventional solution for the NGO's financial struggles: Islamic crowdfunding. Although the board was initially reluctant, the urgency of the situation and the success of the young women's online communication efforts convinced Al-Amal to adopt this new form of financing, which they had never tried before.

Unlike general crowdfunding²⁸⁰, Islamic crowdfunding adheres to the moral standards of Sharia and follows the principles of Islamic finance: it avoids interest (*ribā*), gambling (*maysir*), uncertainty (*gharar*), and other prohibited practices²⁸¹. Additionally, it prohibits transactions lacking a material finality in compliment with guidelines derived from the Quran and Sunnah, and it is aligning with the five higher objectives of Sharia (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*), which are to protect life, religion, intellect, lineage, and wealth (Saiti, Musito, and Yucel 2018). To ensure projects comply with Islamic principles and avoid investments in prohibited sectors, many platforms use guidelines, Shariah experts, and evaluation processes. They also provide continuous feedback and educational resources to help project creators understand and implement Shariah requirements.

²⁷⁹ Reels are short, engaging videos up to 60 seconds long, allowing users to create and explore content with audio and effects. Designed for entertainment and discoverability, they are often used for trends, challenges, and creative expression.

²⁸⁰ Crowdfunding is a form of collective financing established in the 2000s, allowing individuals or organizations to raise funds for a project through contributions from many people, typically using online platforms. The main types of crowdfunding are reward-based, where supporters receive a product or service in return; donation-based, where donors give without expecting a reward; equity-based, where investors get a share of ownership; and debt-based, where financiers lend money and are repaid with interest.

²⁸¹ Most types of crowdfunding are accepted by Islamic finance, except for debt-based crowdfunding, which is prohibited due to the use of interest and excessive uncertainty.

Al-Amal utilized Islamic crowdfunding on two occasions, at the end of 2020 and 2021, launching projects through the platforms LaunchGood²⁸² and Tadamon²⁸³. According to Farida, these platforms were chosen because they specialize in strengthening civil society organizations in member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The endorsement from international organizations like the OIC reassured the NGO board that their activities were both *halāl* and aligned with the economic policies of the monarchy²⁸⁴. Additionally, particularly during the second campaign, these platforms provided a training program where the association learned the key elements required to develop an effective fundraising campaign. This aspect was crucial in motivating Al-Amal to continue with crowdfunding after the first attempt in 2020.

The first campaign, launched at the end of 2020 and dedicated to providing educational support for orphans in poverty, did not reach the estimated total amount, as, according to Farida, “Al-Amal was not sufficiently trained in the tools necessary for an effective online fundraising campaign”. After the end of the first campaign, the NGO debated whether to launch a new one. The board is divided between those, like Farida, who supported this method of self-funding, and others, like Aisha, who view it as inconsistent with moral values (*akhlāq*). Despite these concerns, the growing fear of financial instability, combined with Aisha’s weakened leadership, ultimately leads the board to approve the new campaign. Consequently, for the campaign launched at the end of 2021, the association decide to enroll Meryam and Loubna, a young volunteer, in specialized training for project development and communication provided by the Tadamon platform. Thus, at the end of 2021, a new project focused on education and social marginalization is presented. Unlike the 2020 project, this one includes both a training program to support children in poverty, educational, and social fragility, and the creation of new infrastructures through a renovation plan of the CDS infrastructure.

The preparation for the project’s communication campaign begins in December 2021 and is managed by Meryam, who becomes the communications manager, along with two other volunteers. The NGO agreed to pay for the young woman to attend an online course focused

²⁸² LaunchGood, founded in 2013, is one of the largest crowdfunding platforms for the global Muslim community and offers commission-free services.

²⁸³ Tadamon was founded in 2019 and is supported by the Islamic Solidarity Fund for Development (ISFD), managed by the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

²⁸⁴ The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an intergovernmental organization founded in 1969, comprising 57 member states spread over four continents, including Morocco. Its primary mission is to safeguard and protect the interests of Muslims globally and to supports cooperation in social, economic, cultural, scientific, and political areas among its member states.

on social media communication provided by Tadamon. Meryam shares her training experience: “I learned to plan the campaign with a clear objective, to identify the target audience, and create a detailed marketing strategy... I also learned the importance of telling an engaging story through videos... I learned the origin story... the importance of having a clear origin story... I also learned the strategic points for a successful social media campaign!”. Following these teachings, Meryam and the volunteers focused on producing extensive audiovisual content, starting with the project’s presentation video, which Al-Amal commissioned from two filmmakers and members of a local youth association well known to the NGO. Additionally, Meryam launched Al-Amal’s Instagram page to produce content promoting the project, such as reels²⁸⁵, sometimes in collaboration with local influencers, either on a paid basis or voluntarily (fig. 13). Since Instagram is an ideal platform for audiovisual content and is growing in popularity in Morocco, Al-Amal’s communication strategy shifted to this platform starting at the end of 2021. This shift coincided with a reduction in posts and original content on Facebook, although Meryam did not entirely abandon the latter.

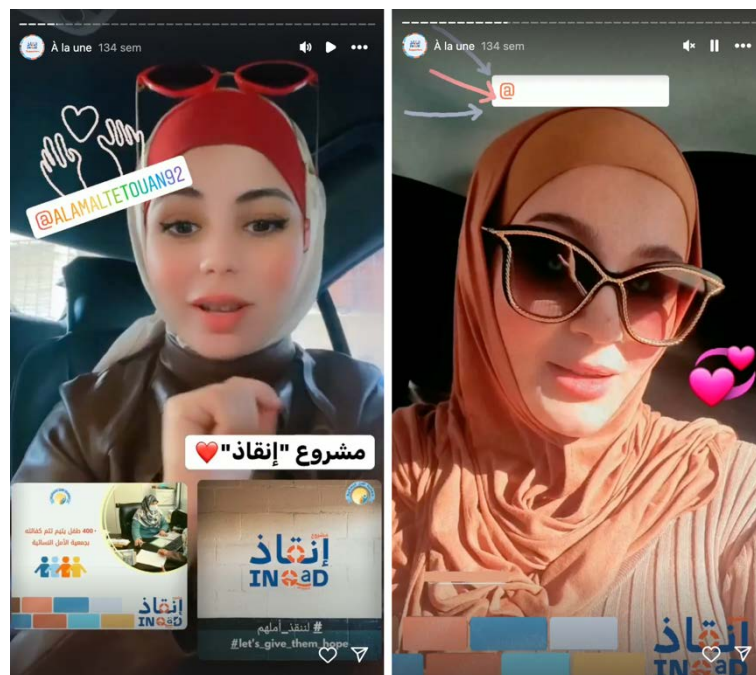


Fig. 13 Reels from Tétouan influencers promoting Al-Amal crowdfunding, Al-Amal Instagram page, February 2022. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Instagram non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

²⁸⁵ Since 2020, Instagram Reels can also be shared on Facebook, which has its own Reels section. Users can choose to share specific Reels or all future Reels on Facebook, increasing visibility and engagement across both platforms.

Meryam explains that the decision to maintain the crowdfunding campaign on Facebook is tied to several factors. First, it allows for diversification of advertisement efforts, enabling the campaign to reach a broader and more varied audience. Additionally, it considers generational differences and the ease or habit of using Facebook among certain demographics, especially among people aged 50 to 60. Finally, Meryam mentions the “respectability” of the page: “The Facebook page has existed for a longer time and has gained a certain respectability... it is important to be able to write posts that people read, to thank our partners, tag them, and ensure that the partners’ names are seen. On Instagram, people don’t read... they just look at videos or images”. The following examples (fig. 14) illustrate how Facebook posts, which combine text, emojis, and images, can be more precise and easier to read and understand than Instagram posts²⁸⁶. These posts feature extensive text paired with various graphic and audiovisual elements, with the crowdfunding link clearly visible. Unlike reels, which automatically skip unless paused, Facebook posts remain static on the home page, allowing users more time to read, engage, and respond.



Fig. 14 The launching post of the crowdfunding campaign (left) and post encouraging donor (right), Al-Amal Facebook page, December 2021. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

Meryam also explains that Facebook is the platform most frequently used by those inclined to make charitable donations to Al-Amal, primarily because, comparing to other platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, its user base tends to be older and have a more stable income. This demographic is generally more financially secure and able to contribute regularly,

²⁸⁶ For an analysis of the non-verbal communication forms used by Islam-oriented groups, including emoji and hashtags, see chapter 8.

making Facebook an ideal platform for reaching potential donors. This is evidenced by the fact that, from 2020 to 2022, Facebook remained the most popular social media platform in Morocco²⁸⁷. Therefore, posting crowdfunding updates on Facebook means effectively reaching and engaging this audience²⁸⁸. Indeed, the pandemic, in addition to slowing down or halting the NGO's ability to launch new projects or continue existing ones also prevented donors to perform essential Islamic charitable acts, such as *zakāt* and *ṣadaqāt*²⁸⁹, thereby increasing the organization's budget deficit.

These donations are collected during festive events organized by the NGO throughout the year or received punctually from donors and mainly consist of material donations (cash or goods). Although dematerialized donations were occasionally present at Al-Amal before the pandemic (in the form of, for example, bank transfers), the sudden and radical need to switch to dematerialized donations during the pandemic, combined with the specific rules for collecting and redistributing donations, especially *zakāt*, which required greater expertise, pushed Al-Amal to rely on online platforms specializing in Islamic charity and community engagement. However, this shift has persisted beyond the pandemic, marked by the launch of a new project at the end of 2021. When asked about this aspect, Farida comments on the desire to present more projects on crowdfunding platforms:

“Charity and benevolence are fundamental aspects of Islam. Before the pandemic, this primarily took place within our local community. Crowdfunding offers a completely new dimension. This method allows us to reach donors all over the world, not just in Tétouan. Additionally, online crowdfunding enables us to raise funds more quickly and efficiently, with greater transparency and traceability of funds. We publish everything on social networks, so donors can follow the progress of the project and see how their donations are used, even if they cannot physically visit the construction site. The

²⁸⁷ For a chart on the most used social media platforms in Morocco from 2020 to 2022, see Appendix 6.

²⁸⁸ This statement is supported by fieldwork observation. The demographic information about the people who like and follow Al-Amal's page, accessible through the page “Insights” section that Meryam allowed me to observe, indicates that Al-Amal's current audience is 87.3% women and 12% men. Additionally, the two largest age groups are 25-34 (about 30%) and 55-64 (about 40%).

²⁸⁹ *Ṣadaqa* (etymologically derived from the Arabic word meaning “righteousness”), refers to voluntary and spontaneous acts of charity performed by Muslims in various forms, including financial donations, good deeds, and benevolent acts promoting generosity, compassion, and social welfare. They are given freely and are not bound by specific rules or predefined recipients. In contrast, *zaka* (etymologically derived from word “purification” in Arabic), is the third of the five pillars of Islam and represents a mandatory act of charity for all Muslims who possess a certain amount of wealth. Its purpose is to purify one's wealth and assist those in need. Generally, *zakāt* amounts to 2.5% of the total wealth accumulated over an Islamic year and can be paid at any time of the year. This amount is distributed among eight categories of beneficiaries specified in the Quran, including the poor and needy (Donner 2010).

association does not want to replace traditional donations but to complement them, offering new opportunities to support large-scale projects with a lasting impact. While our association remains based in Tétouan, we welcome benefactors from all over the world”.

7.2.2 Online Ḥalqa: *Digital Mediation in Student Activism*

Among the main activities of the OREMA group are the internal forums (*al-muntada al-dākhilī*). These events, held on campuses and in university cities, typically last several days, during which activists set up book stands, organize seminars with guest speakers, and facilitate public discussions. Such events are not unique to OREMA; they are also common among other union groups with different political orientations. Based on my observations of various union groups in different Moroccan cities between 2016 and 2022, many factions organize events similar to OREMA’s internal forums, following a similar organizational structure²⁹⁰. However, each group tailors the content to align with its political ideology and financial resources. OREMA, as the leading national union within UNEM, benefits from larger financial resources, making it the most-funded group and allowing it to organize more structured events²⁹¹. For instance, it is the only group that hosts national forums on an annual basis, typically in Rabat or Casablanca, as well as national professional integration forums, such as the “Future Leaders Academy” (*akādīmiyya uṭur al-ghad*) aimed at bringing together students and graduates from top business schools, as well as professionals and economic stakeholders²⁹².

Unlike the day-to-day mediation with university institutions and the pedagogical and administrative guidance that OREMA activists regularly provide to students, events such as internal and national forums are more occasional and hold significant meaning for the group. These forums are important not only for their symbolic value—bringing activists together to reinforce their sense of belonging—but also for their role in fostering networking opportunities. While national forums tend to be broader in scope, internal forums, which are independently organized by each university section, focus more on specific aspects such as

²⁹⁰ For example, groups associated with Marxist-Leninist movements refer to their events as “cultural days” (*ayyam thaqaḥiyya*). Like OREMA, they also set up book stands, organize seminars, and hold discussion circles within university campuses and student cities. These data come from fieldwork conducted during several months between 2016 and 2018 in the cities of Meknès, Kenitra, Rabat, and Fez for a MA degree in ethnology and social anthropology obtained in 2018 at EHESS, Paris (thesis title: *En quête de reconnaissance, en quête de sens. Être des jeunes étudiants de gauche au Maroc aujourd’hui*).

²⁹¹ No official statistics are available on the funding allocated to student union groups. Therefore, these observations are based on the qualitative fieldwork conducted for this thesis and prior fieldworks.

²⁹² Highlighting the forum’s professional orientation, it is significant that it has established a LinkedIn page, the social network for professionals. See <https://www.linkedin.com/company/future-leaders-academy-ma/about/>.

fundraising (through the sale of books, group merchandise, and self-funding by the activists) and strengthening internal relationships within the group, as well as increasing visibility among the student population. The internal forums primarily cover topics related to education and training, both in pedagogical and religious contexts. Islamic principles, derived from the Quran, Sunna, and Hadith, are not only explored from a religious standpoint but, most significantly, from a civic perspective. This civic dimension emphasizes individual behavior and participation within the community, emphasizing responsibilities and contributions to collective well-being²⁹³.

Given the symbolic and practical significance of these forums, the choice of the host university is determined by the group's numerical strength and financial capacities, with activists from other sections invited to participate as delegates. The evolution of OREMA Tétouan's forum hosting reflects the growing digital integration into the union's activities. In 2016 and 2017, the forums were fully offline, but from 2018 onwards, they adopted a hybrid format. In 2019, the forum was hybrid but hosted in Tangier, with OREMA activists from Tétouan traveling there in person. By 2020, due to the pandemic, the forum moved entirely online. By cross-referencing online and offline observations with interview data from activists, I noticed a general consistency in the types of activities conducted during the forums, regardless of whether they were held in online or offline formats. Aside from minor initiatives, such as book stands and banners displaying the group's name and values in the campus corridors, the internal forums are structured similarly both online and offline. These forums run throughout the week, culminating in Friday prayer, which marks the conclusion of all activities. Regardless of whether it takes place online or offline, each day features a series of events, scheduled in the morning and afternoon, with a break for lunch in between. Every session—whether it's a seminar, a conference, or a Quranic recitation—begins and ends with a *ḥalqa*.

When we talk about *ḥalqa* (pl. *ḥalaqāt*), we refer to both the forms taken by religious discussions and the oldest form of traditional theater, still present in most public squares in the cities and villages of Morocco (fig. 15). This street performance and discussion circle in public spaces consists of one or more storytellers (*ḥalāqī*) at the center, with the audience gathered around them. The audience can also become involved in the *ḥalqa* through questions or by directly participating in the activities at the center of the circle²⁹⁴. The same principle of

²⁹³ For an in-depth discussion on these aspects, see 9.1.2 and 9.2.2.

²⁹⁴ Derived from Berber oral culture, the term *ḥalqa* means “circle” in Arabic and refers to the group that forms around artists during their performances (Chakroun 1998). *Ḥalqa* includes storytelling, poetry, juggling,

the *ḥalqa* is used by student groups (fig. 16). OREMA's *ḥalaqāt* are open to everyone and provide the standard framework for the group's public discussions, following specific expressive rules that, in a sense, resemble the rhetorical forms of the traditional stories narrated by the *hlaīqī*. Many activists have vivid memories of certain *ḥalqa* sessions during the forums of 2016 and 2017, organized in the sports field of the Faculty of Sciences due to the large number of participants. In the forums of 2018 and 2021, held on campus and streamed online, *ḥalqa* sessions were the most viewed live events²⁹⁵. Fatima, still in high school in 2018, recalls that watching one of these streamed *ḥalqa* sessions motivated her to participate in OREMA's open days once she started university. Even in 2020, when the campus was closed due to COVID, the forums were held entirely online (fig. 18). The *ḥalqa* is a fundamental practice for the group, serving as the communicative framework for all public discussions with peers.



Fig. 15 *Ḥalqa* in El Hadim Square, Meknes, Central Morocco, March 2018.
Photo by Eleonora Landucci. © Eleonora Landucci.

acrobatics, magic, and music. It is not only a form of entertainment but also an important means of historical transmission and cultural expression in Morocco. *Ḥalqa* also serves social functions, acting as meeting points for the community and places of social exchange, where participants can interact with the narrator about personal or community issues. However, these performances are increasingly being commercialized due to mass tourism, as seen with the *ḥalqa* at the famous Jemaa el-Fnaa in Marrakech (Ait Tabassir 1994; Borghi 2008; Borghi and Soriani 2006; Borghi 2004).

²⁹⁵ For a weekly average of views of *ḥalaqāt*'s live videos, seminars, Quran readings, and other events from 2018 to 2022 on OREMA's Facebook page, see Appendix 18.



Fig. 16 Halqa in the Faculty of Sciences, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University of Tétouan. Photo posted in OREMA's Facebook page, May 2017. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.



Fig. 17 Live video posted in OREMA's Facebook page of a hybrid halqa in the Faculty of Humanities (Martil), Abdelmalek Essaâdi University of Tétouan, April 2018. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

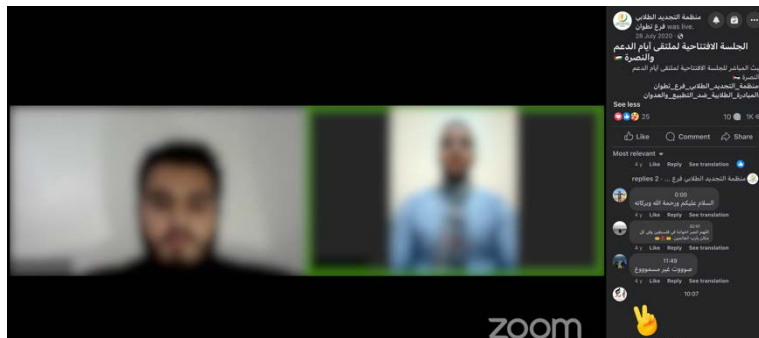


Fig. 18 Live video posted in OREMA's Facebook page of an online halqa, July 2020. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

At the beginning of a *ḥalqa*, the group's slogans are chanted, initiated by the leaders and then repeated by the group, similar to religious homilies or street protests. To ensure full participation in the slogans chanting, the leaders position themselves equidistantly and slightly outside the circle for better controlling it. The initial slogans must be well-executed to attract passersby and convey a sense of unity and strength. A speaker, usually a leader, steps to the center of the *ḥalqa* and opens the debate with a speech introducing the topic, often prepared in advance. The speech always begins and ends with specific thanks and greetings. The rhetoric of the greetings demonstrates the existence of predefined forms, given the meter and declamatory tone used by the speakers.

The format of the hybrid *ḥalqa* remains unchanged: the *ḥalqa* takes place on campus but is broadcast live on Facebook. Typically, the camera's point of view is within the circle, giving viewers the sensation of being part of the discussion (fig. 17). In the hybrid *ḥalqa*, the main interactions occur in person, but there are also interactions from online participants, such as written comments and emojis²⁹⁶. For example, while the "V" for victory gesture is often used during in-person *ḥalqa*, thumbs up or heart emojis are commonly seen replacing this gesture during live videos (fig. 18)²⁹⁷. Comments are less frequent in the observed hybrid *ḥalaqāt* of 2018 and 2022, and only few of them are written at the end of the *ḥalqa*, contrary to 2020s *ḥalaqāt*.

OREMA's internal forum in 2020 was different from previous ones, as it was the only one held entirely online. In 2020, due to the pandemic, all offline group activities were suspended, and the internal forum was organized in a reduced 3-day format on Facebook. However, everything related to the event itself that couldn't be moved online, such as book stands, lunch breaks, and evening gatherings at the campus or university café, was suspended. The forum's activities remained the same, but their format became entirely digital, including the *ḥalqa*. This shift led to the use of Facebook's live video broadcasting, integrated with conferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet, allowing multiple speakers to participate in the same live video. During the 2020 forum, live videos from bigger sections, such as Casablanca's, were shared and reposted by smaller sections, such as Tétouan's. Fatima explains

²⁹⁶ Emojis are small digital images or icons used to visually express emotions, objects, ideas, or situations within text. They are commonly used in text messages, social media, and online communications to add visual context to written content.

²⁹⁷ Further analysis of the emoji uses will be provided in chapter 8.

that OREMA Maroc²⁹⁸ aimed to centralize and unify the union’s online presence, leveraging audiences and content produced by the larger sections. To confirm this, an analysis of the 2020 forum content views shows significantly higher rates for content produced by the larger sections compared to that produced by Tétouan²⁹⁹.

The elements of interactions during the *ḥalqa* have been adapted for online settings. While in the offline *ḥalqa*, anyone was allowed to enter de circle and speak, direct access to online conferencing platform during a live video posed technical challenges³⁰⁰. As a result, in the online *ḥalqa*, real-time written comments have replaced oral debates, and digital images have emerged as new ways for participants to engage. The speakers of the online *ḥalqa* cannot engage in direct debate with the commenters but can respond orally by reading the comments during the live session or later in writing after the session has ended. Both the live videos of the *ḥalqa* and the related comments remain visible in the “Live” section of the Facebook page, allowing viewers to “relive” the *ḥalqa* and respond or comment afterward. Finally, being the live session public, the influence of the online *ḥalqa* extends beyond the student population.

7.2.3 Mosque Posts: Virtualization of Sacred Spaces

In Morocco, access to sacred places is regulated by state laws, which have gradually evolved over the years to govern every aspect of their management and use³⁰¹. This regulation covers the construction and maintenance of religious buildings, the conduct of religious services, the designation of who can officiate them, and the management of access times and entry procedures. This legal framework also prohibits non-Muslims from entering the country’s sacred places³⁰². Although this restriction is justified by interpretations of Quranic and Hadith principles, its origins trace back to the period of the French Protectorate. Under

²⁹⁸ Although OREMA does not have a headquarters, the union’s central committees are in Casablanca and Rabat, the economic and political centers of the country.

²⁹⁹ For a comprehensive chart of the weekly views of 2020’s forum, see Appendix 18.

³⁰⁰ On Zoom, the maximum number of participants ranges from 100 to 1,000, depending on the paid subscription. On Google Meet, it ranges from 100 to 250 participants, also based on the subscription plan.

³⁰¹ This legislative framework includes royal decrees, penal codes, and ministerial guidelines. Dahir 6440 establishes the legal framework for managing Moroccan communes and sacred places, such as mosques (*Dahir Du 20 Ramadan 1436 (7 Juillet 2015) Portant Promulgation de La Loi Organique No. Relative Aux Communes* 2015). Article 221 of the Penal Code criminalizes disturbances in religious settings, ensuring their protection. Additionally, guidelines from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs regulate access to and management of these sacred spaces, emphasizing compliance with religious and civil norms. See the web page of the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs <https://habous.gov.ma/fr/pr%C3%A9pos%C3%A9s-religieux.html>.

³⁰² The only exception is the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, where non-Muslims are permitted to enter at specific times as part of guided tours. This same policy is also applied in other Maghreb countries, such as Tunisia (Caputo 2010).

the pretext of preserving the “sanctity” of Muslim places and worship (Rivet 2006), colonial authorities imposed measures aimed at controlling the local population, integrating the segregation of sacred spaces into the broader *divide et impera* strategy that defined much of French colonial policy³⁰³. This policy of religious segregation continued to shape the governance of religious affairs after Morocco’s independence, through the process of Islamization and the centralization of religious authority under the monarchy.

As local officials appointed by the Supreme Council of Ulema, the ulema of M’diq-Fnideq follow and implement this governance model. Tariq explains that access and management of mosque spaces are governed by regular ministerial directives, whose implementation is monitored by ministry officials through requested reports and inspections of mosques and councils. The president of the ulema also emphasizes that the prohibition on non-Muslims accessing sacred spaces is part of the same directive that bans unauthorized photographing, recording, or filming of worship services and seminars within the mosque. This directive, which regulates not only who is allowed to “enter” but also what is permitted to “come out”, is designed to prevent any interpretations or positions that diverges from official orthodoxy. Given that smartphones have become the primary means for producing photos, audio, and video, it is noteworthy that this regulation implies a continuity between physical and virtual access. The control over religious content extends beyond physical boundaries, reaching into virtual environments and expressing itself through the promotion of the official narrative within these contexts³⁰⁴. The creation of the Facebook profile and page of the ulema of M’diq-Fnideq is an example of this approach, even though its establishment did not respond to any explicit institutional guidelines concerning digital dissemination of religious content.

The council’s Facebook profile and page were created to address the need for a new communication channel with the faithful, as traditional means—such as the physical spaces of the mosque and local and national media like radio and TV—became inaccessible during the lockdown. Initially, the platform served as a central hub for content shared across various virtual spaces. However, after the pandemic, while the WhatsApp group was reduced to a channel for internal communications and the YouTube channel stopped posting content in April 2022, Facebook emerged as the primary virtual space for promoting and sharing the council’s activities. By late 2021, as in-person activities resumed after more than a year of intermittent closures, the Facebook page began regularly posting photos and videos

³⁰³ For an overview of French colonial policy, see 4.2 and 4.3.1.

³⁰⁴ For further details about the regime’s uses of digital media, see Part 2, chapter 6.

documenting cultural, religious, and educational events organized by the ulema, imams, and *murshidāt* of the M'diq-Fnideq prefecture (fig. 19).

These posts typically combine photos or videos with descriptive text. The images are mostly taken inside various mosques in the M'diq and Fnideq areas or within the council's meeting spaces. While many photos highlight activities organized by the council's Women and Family Affairs Unit, the videos rarely feature women and never show moments of prayer; only male prayer sessions are recorded. The images often depict men and women seated in circles during lessons, discussions or prayers led by the ulema, or imams and *murshidāt*, and shown engaging in prayer, Quranic recitations, and theological discussions. The accompanying text usually follows a standard format, beginning with phrases like “in the framework of” or “as part of” (*fi itār khitṭa*), then specifying the location, date, and who led the session, along with a brief description of the topics covered. Additionally, most posts are framed by specific hashtags at the beginning and end, underscoring their connection to the religious community. Common hashtags often include Islamic honorifics and especially the *tasmīyya*³⁰⁵.



Fig. 19 Video post of a Quranic recitation (left), photo post of a Friday sermon lecture at the Fnideq mosque (center), and photo post from the women's prayer hall during a lesson given by a *murshida* (right). Ulema's Facebook page, April and July 2022. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

In this context, the photographic and audiovisual representation of the mosque's sacred spaces is considered legitimate, as Tariq explains, because it aims to “encourage believers to return to the mosque” and is carried out with “respect”. This carefulness is due to the fact that Khaoula, who manages the council's Facebook page, is not solely responsible for taking the photos and writing the posts. Instead, the process involves the participation of multiple members of the council and the mosque. For women's activities, if Khaoula isn't the one taking

³⁰⁵ For an analysis of the use of these hashtags, see 8.1.1 and 8.1.2.

the photos, the task often falls to the *murshidāt* leading the lessons or the female attendees themselves, who then send the images to the Facebook page. Since Islamic spaces are gender-segregated, the same system applies to men's events: in these cases, it is usually Saddiq, the council's all-round assistant, or the ulema and male attendees who take the photos during the activities. Moreover, although Khaoula writes the posts, she often submits them to the president or other council members for review and approval before publishing. This approach ensures the content is both appropriate and aligned with the mosque's principles.

When I ask Tariq for further clarification on how they determine which content is appropriate to display, and how they reconcile the contradiction of not showing certain sacred spaces to specific groups (e.g., non-Muslims) while choosing to share them on the Facebook page, Tariq explains that these posts “are like the call of the muezzin from the minaret (*adhān*): everyone can hear it, but it is directed towards Muslims”. He further emphasizes that these posts serve a *da'wa* purpose, meaning they function as a “call” to Islam, aimed at inviting believers back to the mosque and strengthening their connection with the religious community:

“The Facebook page is a tool that serves a specific need for “*da'wa*”: calling the faithful. The primary objective is to use all available technological means to keep the call alive... especially during the pandemic, when access to mosques was restricted... You know, facing such a challenging event, the ulema had the duty to use all possible means to reinforce the *umma*”.

7.3 Hybridization of Space

The different crossing practices outlined in the previous pages may include practices occurring simultaneously in both physical and virtual environments, shifting from one space to another due to external or internal factors affecting the groups, or fostering continuous interaction between the two spaces. Each practice carries specific implications within Islam-oriented groups. For example, the dematerialization of community activism undertaken by Al-Amal during its crowdfunding campaign not only involves converting traditional material donations into digital contributions but also reshapes the spatial dynamics of Al-Amal's social interactions. Similarly, digital mediation, as seen in OREMA's use of Facebook live videos, integrates online and offline activities, creating a new form of spatiality within the *halqa*. The virtualization of sacred spaces through Facebook's photo and video posting on the council's page represents another form of “crossing”. In this case, the virtual environment allows these spatial images to take on new functions and meanings within the online community.

These practices contribute to creating spaces that span both the online and offline realms, fostering their hybridization. The reconfiguration of physical spaces into hybrid environments brings about a profound transformation in social dynamics. Digital media play a dual role in this process: they facilitate new forms of participation, opening innovative ways for people to engage with their surroundings, but they can also intensify existing inequalities. As these hybrid spaces evolve, they may create invisible barriers for those who are unable to adapt to these new modes of interaction, leaving certain groups excluded from the benefits of technological integration. In this subchapter, I will further analyze the data presented in the previous pages to understand how this hybridization process develops through criteria of “mobility” and “usability”, affecting Islam-oriented groups in different ways.

7.3.1 Mobility

A common element of the crossing practices between online and offline observed in the context of Islam-oriented groups is the widespread use of smartphones³⁰⁶. These devices are crucial for meeting the demands of connectivity and mobility. For instance, Al-Amal has adapted its crowdfunding efforts to platforms with mobile-friendly interfaces, making the donation process easily accessible anytime, anywhere. Similarly, OREMA conducts its hybrid *ḥalaqāt* via live video streamed through smartphones, offering greater flexibility and simplicity in event management. The ulema use smartphones to capture photos and videos documenting mosque events and lessons, underscoring the importance of these devices as versatile tools for producing and distributing digital content. Smartphones stand out for being less expensive, more convenient, and more versatile for everyday use compared to desktop or laptop computers. Most importantly, they are defined by the mobility they offer to their users.

As Fatima notes while explaining how to set up the space for an online *ḥalqa* organized by OREMA: “The phone can be placed anywhere, even on a rock... any place can become the *ḥalqa*”. This emphasis on practicality and flexibility is a recurring theme when discussing the use of social media with the interlocutors. Farida highlights the “ease” with which online donations can be collected or made, pointing out that it can be done “from home”. In fact, mobile devices and social media are now so deeply intertwined that it’s hard to imagine them

³⁰⁶ This aligns with national statistics, which indicate that the internet is more frequently accessed via smartphones than on laptops or desktop computers. Averaging data from 2020 to 2022, approximately 52% of internet access occurred through smartphones, while around 40% was via laptops. The gap is even more pronounced when it comes to Facebook access: about 98% of users access social media through mobile phones, with only 1% using laptops. For further details, see annual reports on DataReportal’s website, <https://datareportal.com/digital-in-morocco>.

as separate entities. When I ask Khaoula why she prefers using a smartphone to take photos of the mosque instead of a camera, which would provide higher quality, she smiles and says, “how would I upload the photos to Facebook then?” For Khaoula, who is 27 at the time of the research, the smartphone is not just a communication tool but an essential part of how she interacts with the world. Her choice to use a smartphone is driven not only by its convenience but also by its ability to make the interaction between offline and online instant and seamless.

These comments emphasize that smartphones are not simply seen as technologies, but as extensions of everyday life through which experiences and interactions are created, shared, and consumed (de Souza e Silva 2006). In contexts where interconnection between online and offline spheres are increasingly frequent and intermittent, smartphones go beyond merely portability and convenience. Their significance lies in their ability to seamlessly connect actions to results, enabling uninterrupted interaction between the real and virtual worlds. This constant connectivity has profoundly changed the way different generations perceive “access” to the Internet. For young women like Fatima, Khaoula, and Meryam, the Internet is not a separate space to be accessed at specific times, but a continuous presence fully integrated into their daily lives.

An illustrative example of this impact is Meryam’s management of the Al-Amal crowdfunding campaign. Beyond sharing posts and stories on the NGO’s page, Meryam uses her personal social media channels to offer a behind-the-scenes view of the campaign, such as filming influencers as they record stories to promote the crowdfunding effort. In doing so, Meryam is not just advancing a fundraising initiative; she is also actively reshaping her public image. She presents herself as both a “good Muslim”, as she often says, committed to supporting community projects, and as a young woman successfully building a meaningful career within a prominent organization. For Meryam’s generation, the online sphere is more than just a tool, it is a fully-fledged social environment, that constantly permeate into her everyday offline interactions. In this context, stories become a medium not only for promoting the campaign but also for crafting and expressing her subjectivity as a pious, engaged, and dynamic young woman. This hybrid space is far from being a mere extension of the offline world; it is a dynamic environment, where social participation and power structures are continually reshaped and negotiated³⁰⁷.

The impact of smartphone-enabled mobility in the hybridization of online and offline spaces is not uniform; it varies based on factors such as generation, cultural capital, and social class. While younger social actors often experience a seamless continuity between their online

³⁰⁷ For an in-depth analysis of agency renegotiation within Islam-oriented groups, see subchapter 9.2.

and offline lives, this connection is less pronounced among older generations. For example, although Tariq is active on platforms like YouTube and in traditional media such as radio and television, he opts for more formal and one-directional channels. His online interaction, though also conducted via smartphone, primarily target a passive audience, and lack the immediacy and interactivity typical of social media platforms. This divide in digital media usage can also be attributed to differences in cultural capital and access to technological skills. Even within the same generational group, there are notable variations in how comfortably individuals navigate digital tools, often linked to differences in educational access and social class. For instance, in its educational programs designed to support precarious youth, Al-Amal offered training sessions focused on enhancing digital literacy, including training sessions on how to use social media for job searches. These initiatives underscore the gaps in digital literacy that exist across different social classes, as not all segments of the population have equal access to or familiarity with these essential digital tools.

The hybridization of online and offline spaces unfolds unevenly across different groups. For older generations, the shift from landlines to mobile phones, and later to smartphones for messaging and online activities, has been a gradual and sometimes challenging process. In contrast, younger generations, like Meryam and Khaoula, who have grown up in a digital world, see the Internet as a constant, seamlessly integrated into their daily lives. This hybridization is shaped not only by generational differences but also by the cultural and social capital of each group. Digital platforms often mirror and even deepen existing social inequalities. The fact that NGOs like Al-Amal, dedicated to addressing social inequalities, are launching projects to promote equitable Internet access is particularly significant. These initiatives reveal gaps in digital literacy, particularly as Internet access becomes increasingly crucial (e.g., for professional integration). Although Morocco has introduced digital education programs, such as the “Digital Generation” initiative³⁰⁸, the country continues to face significant challenges, including inadequate infrastructure and a lack of sufficiently trained educators. This gap has created

³⁰⁸ Launched as an integral element of the Morocco Digital 2030 Strategy (2024), the “Digital Generation” initiative is part of a broader strategy to advance digital education and skills development across the country. It focuses on improving digital infrastructure and equipping young people with the skills necessary to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving tech-driven economy. These efforts are supported by the Agency of Digital Development (ADD)—a public institution with legal personality and financial autonomy established in 2017—in collaboration with international organizations and technology companies, such as UNESCO and Huawei (Lahsini and El Yaacoubi 2024).

opportunities for international and national organizations to step in, addressing the shortcomings of traditional educational systems with targeted projects³⁰⁹.

The varying degrees of mobility between online and offline spheres reshape the boundaries between public and private spaces in different ways within Islam-oriented groups, as observed in their crossing practices. For instance, during online *ḥalqa*, participants describe how they engage in public discussions while physically situated in private spaces or take part in personal or community activities in public settings. This redefines the spatial dynamics of the *ḥalqa*. In offline settings, the public space of the campus plays a pivotal role in asserting the group's visibility and legitimacy: the larger the gathering and the more central its location, the greater its visibility among the student population, which in turn enhances the group's status. This spatial dimension of collective legitimization is transformed into online *ḥalqa*, especially during the pandemic. The success of an online *ḥalqa* is now measured more by the number of live viewers, the volume of messages and interactions during the event, and the frequency with which the event is shared or reposted.

The digital mediation of the *ḥalqa* not only alter the group's visibility through spatiality but also transforms the collective experiences and social relationships that typically develop in offline spaces: participation is no longer confined to the need to be physically present in a specific location. Hasna highlights this shift by praising the ease with which individuals can join events directly from their homes, turning private spaces into places of socialization and collective action. As she herself states: "Brothers and sisters who were hesitant to show themselves in public can participate without fear". Digital mediation also enables the group to reach a broader audience and fosters new types of social relationships. For instance, this mediation, which primarily relies on written or symbolic exchanges (such as emojis and likes), creates conditions for greater gender *mixité*. In online *ḥalqa*, the traditional gender segregation that characterizes OREMA's physical gatherings cannot occur, allowing for much more frequent non-segregated interaction and redefining traditional spatial gender norms³¹⁰. However, the online space does not eliminate the public dimension; instead, it reshapes it by introducing new forms governed by distinct normative systems. While the ability to speak from

³⁰⁹ These dynamic benefits both the institutions, which can rely on these organizations to help bridge the digital literacy divide, and the NGOs themselves, which, recognizing the growing demand for digital skills, are able to secure funding and resources from development aid programs. In this way, these organizations not only meet an urgent structural need but also thrive as non-profit entities, responding to a key priority of international policies, especially concerning Global South countries. See the website of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Gals, last access, September 2024, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

³¹⁰ For further analysis of the consequences of these spatial reconfigurations on accessibility and legitimacy, see 7.3.2.

the safety of one's home may make the online environment seem more secure, it is not exempt from the political and social controls that exist in Morocco's offline public spaces. This is evident in cases where individuals have been imprisoned for criticizing the king on social media³¹¹.

The fluid interplay between public and private spaces, and between physical and digital realms, which defines the hybridization of spaces among Islam-oriented groups, reveals both new opportunities for inclusion and participation and new challenges related to regulation and the standardization of social dynamics. As previously noted, during the pandemic, OREMA's legitimacy, traditionally grounded in the specific spatial and social dynamics of the campus, became reliant on standardized digital metrics, which were easily replicable. This shift towards quantitative measures may implicate a certain homogenization of the *halaqa* experience. As stated in section 7.2.2, in 2020, OREMA's national leadership furthered this process by centralizing and standardizing digital communication, encouraging smaller local sections to repost *halaqāt* from larger, more followed sections like Casablanca and Rabat. This transformation made the *halaqāt* less contextually rooted in the local specificities of the group and more adapted to the homogeneous image that OREMA national wanted to convey. Indeed, far from being a neutral arena, the digital space reflects and reproduces the hierarchies and power structures that operate in physical public spaces as well.

7.3.2 Usability

Another factor contributing to the hybridization of spaces is the usability of those online spheres in which Islam-oriented groups are particularly active. This concept is especially relevant to social media platforms, which have become deeply embedded in the daily interactions between social actors and physical spaces, largely due to the widespread use of mobile devices. By "usability", I refer not only to how these online spaces are utilized but also to how they are inhabited by social actors. Navigating these digital environments requires a certain level of digital literacy, which in turn shapes who can access and engage with these platforms. This usability directly influences participation and, ultimately, which discourses are

³¹¹ In 2019, YouTuber Mohamed Sekkaki was sentenced to four years in prison for a YouTube video in which he criticized the King of Morocco and the country's social situation. Similarly, in 2020, journalist Omar Radi was arrested on charges of insulting the king on Twitter. See BBC News Afrique blog, "*Mohamed Sekkaki, alias 'Moul Kaskita', condamné à quatre ans de prison au Maroc*", December 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-50925909>; Amnesty International blog, "Morocco/Western Sahara: Court hands journalist four-month suspended sentence and fine for a tweet", March 17, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2020/03/morocco-western-sahara-court-hands-journalist-four-month-suspended-sentence-and-fine-for-a-tweet/>.

legitimized within these spaces. I will examine the different dimensions of usability, showing how it facilitates the process of hybridization between online and offline spaces, reshaping social dynamics in the process.

Online field observations reveal that the Facebook pages of Islam-oriented groups are not simply “used” but actively “curated” and “decorated” on a daily basis. While websites serve mainly as information repositories, Facebook pages play a more dynamic and representative role, acting as virtual “business cards” for these groups. For instance, Al-Amal demonstrates this by sharing the link to their Facebook page, rather than their website, on their crowdfunding platform under the “contacts—website” section³¹². By “decorating”, I mean the process of intentionally shaping these digital spaces, much like decorating a room to convey a specific message or image. This is visible in Al-Amal’s cover photo, crafted by Meryam, to align with the image the NGO wanted to convey³¹³. The same principle is evident in the Facebook page of the ulema, which features daily updates with carefully presented photos and descriptions of group activities. In OREMA, this approach is reflected in the decision to adopt a standardized design for all its sections across Morocco, ensuring a cohesive and unified image for the union. This “decoration” not only enhances the visual appeal but also strengthens the group’s cohesion and legitimacy within the digital space.

When asked about this aspect, many interlocutors referred to it in terms of “presentation”. For Tariq, the Facebook page serves as a “window into the council”³¹⁴. Tariq’s words underscore how Facebook is not merely a communication platform but a virtual space that extends the religious and community activities of the ulema, facilitating ongoing interaction with the faithful. In this sense, the page functions as a virtual extension of the mosque. The careful curation of posts and the overall setup of the page are not neutral actions; they have significant social implications. Through this digital decoration, the ulema continue their *da’wa* mission: adapting the practices of sacralization typically associated with physical spaces to the virtual realm³¹⁵. This digital curation not only expands the reach of their religious teachings but also strengthens the bonds within their community during times of social and spatial isolation, such as the pandemic. Most importantly, this deliberate structuring of the online space enables the ulema to create a virtual environment that mirrors and reinforces the

³¹²For further details, see Al-Amal’s profile on crowdfunding platform Tadamon, last access, December 2022, <https://tadamon.community/organisations/association-al-amal>.

³¹³ For a description of Al-Amal’s page, see 7.1.2.

³¹⁴ For a complete transcription of the excerpt and its analysis, see 8.2.2.

³¹⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the forms this readaptation takes, see 8.1.2, 8.2.2, and subchapter 8.2.

disciplinary norms of the mosque's physical spaces, ensuring that the authority and sanctity typically evoked in those settings are preserved and remain influential within the online realm.

These online spatial practices require moments of learning and adaptation which develops through online literacy. By "literacy" I refer to the intentional or unintentional process of acquiring the necessary skills to navigate and interact within a given environment. A notable example of this is the *halqa* in its online form: as it transitions to live videos on Facebook, its traditionally spatial, face-to-face, and oral nature is replaced by new modes of interaction, centered around digitally mediated forms of presence, such as written comments, emojis, and delayed responses. This transformation is not merely a shift from a physical space to a virtual one; it also requires mastering the verbal and non-verbal codes that govern the new environment. Facebook, for instance, operates with a specific communicative framework. While this framework is designed to be intuitive, user-friendly, and standardized, it nonetheless demands a period of learning for users to fully understand and effectively navigate it.

It is important to highlight that social actors, once acquiring digital literacy, often reshape these languages to serve their own purposes. While operating within a standardized digital framework, they reconfigure it, frequently diverging from the mainstream uses for which these platforms were originally designed. This phenomenon is comparable to what happens in physical spaces, where environments are repurposed and reimagined through daily crossing. For example, this adaptation can be seen in the personalized use of hashtags on the ulema's Facebook page or the use of emojis by OREMA³¹⁶. Moreover, this reconfiguration also involves a process of selective adaptation. After the pandemic, when the *halqa* returned to a hybrid format, activists retained only the online elements they found most useful, such as live streaming events and accepting online speakers. Although the online space continues to offer visibility for the group beyond the boundaries of the university campus, the centrality of physical space as a key tool for group visibility led to the return of the *halqa* back into a physical setting. In this new arrangement, the online component serves as a complementary and functional tool, primarily aiming at facilitating the organization and communication of the group.

In this context, it is essential to highlight that offline spaces remain central for young Moroccans, particularly the university campus and dormitories. In countries where regulatory control over the youth is pervasive and enforced not only by institutions but also by family structures, these spaces offer rare opportunities for socialization, personal development, and

³¹⁶ This literacy is extensively discussed in chapter 8.

the exploration of new identities, away from familial scrutiny and rigid social norms³¹⁷. As I observed in several Moroccan campuses between 2016 and 2022, students often spend time on campus outside of class hours, not only for academic purposes but also for the informal social interactions it offers. The campus architecture, with its covered walkways, gardens, and shaded courtyards, creates spaces where young people can gather and socialize without the constant pressure of societal surveillance, which is more common in other public spaces (Landucci 2019).

Usability of online spaces significantly influences how local actors participate in these spaces and how they legitimate themselves through participation. Numerous studies focused on digital media and participation (Najar 2013b; 2013a; Laouni 2020; Aday et al. 2012), have highlighted how online environments have broadened access to the public sphere by reducing restrictive and risky barriers to participation. Factors such as the elimination of geographical limitations and the ability to engage remotely have allowed a wider and more diverse range of voices to emerge, offering individuals excluded from public spaces the opportunity to have a voice. This expanded accessibility has also challenged the traditional norms and hierarchies that govern public and private spaces. For instance, as seen in the case of online *ḥalqa*, the inability to physically separate men and women led to the creation of mixed *ḥalqa*, a rare occurrence in OREMA's activities within physical public spaces. However, increased accessibility does not automatically lead to a change in social norms. While gender segregation can, in some ways, contribute to power dynamics, it can also reflect forms of agency. OREMA's female activists, for example, use non-mixed spaces as a means of legitimization through the practice of *entre-soi*, and the absence of these spaces during the pandemic weakened female accessibility to *ḥalaqāt*³¹⁸. Fatima explains this situation to me as follows: "I feel comfortable only with other sisters... and I want to avoid committing immoral (*ḥarām*) acts".

This example illustrates how online spaces reshape dynamics of legitimization, influencing both who can participate in public discourse and the extent of their involvement. Field data reveal that online platforms enhance the legitimacy of Islam-oriented groups within their communities by increasing their visibility. However, this legitimacy remains tightly linked

³¹⁷ An extensive body of literature has examined how practices of sociability and processes of subjectivation among Arab youth are shaped through their navigation and interaction with public, semi-public, and private spaces. These studies emphasize that such spaces—both physical and symbolic—are not merely sites of interaction and exchange but also arenas for identity negotiation and social positioning (Assaf 2013c; 2013a; 2013b; Assaf, Gasparotto, and Slitine 2019; Cheikh 2013; 2009; 2020; Le Renard 2011; Gasparotto 2013; Cantini 2016; Gâelle Gillot 2005; Gâelle Gillot and Martinez 2015; Bonnefoy and Catusse 2013; Chaudat and Lachheb 2018; Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi 1994; Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag 2007).

³¹⁸ The practice of the *ḥalqa* is discussed in detail in 9.2.2.

to the dominant normative frameworks—whether socio-cultural, political, or economic. In other words, online spaces provide a platform for legitimization only to the extent that they do not openly challenge existing power structures. For instance, Al-Amal uses its Facebook page to establish itself as a leading NGO in community engagement, particularly in supporting women and families in need. After a successful crowdfunding campaign, the organization has been able to present itself as an independent actor, strengthening a governance model rooted in social auto-entrepreneurship. While this model reinforces Al-Amal’s image as an organization capable of addressing community needs, it also aligns with and legitimizes Morocco’s broader social policies, which increasingly shift state welfare responsibilities to local third-party actors. In this context, the legitimacy gained by local actors through online spaces risks reinforcing existing power structures, rather than offering a genuine alternative or driving structural change.

Online spheres are becoming increasingly integrated into offline contexts, giving rise to new types of hybrid spaces. Rather than reducing the importance of physical mobility, the advent of the Internet has made the relationship between digital and physical spaces more fluid and interconnected (Frith 2012). For example, the planning of ulema activities, as well as call for application for imam and muezzin training courses is only published on Facebook, and Al-Amal’s crowdfunding campaigns were primarily promoted through Facebook, demonstrating how social media platforms are becoming essential tools for *Islam-oriented groups*³¹⁹. However, these hybrid spaces can also create new forms of exclusion or contribute to reproducing existing power dynamics within different social groups in Moroccan society. To fully grasp these dynamics, it is crucial to understand how social actors engage with and navigate these spaces, contributing to their hybridization. In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into these new forms of interaction and examine how they are reshaping the perception and use of space.

³¹⁹ For a more in-depth analysis of the social and spatial practices of Islam-oriented groups in online spheres, refer to subchapters 8.2 and 9.2.

ON RESEMIOTIZATION



Fig. 20 Animated GIF sent via WhatsApp. April 2022. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Eleonora Landucci.

For Islam-oriented groups, digital media are not merely communication tools; they become actual spaces for interaction and meaning, equivalent to offline spaces. As I extensively examined in subchapter 7.3, the online and offline spaces that these groups navigate are not separated by rigid boundaries; instead, they are fluid and adaptable, depending on the types of actions the groups undertake, as well as their frequency and intensity. These practices, described in subchapter 7.2 as “crossing between online and offline spaces”, contribute to a process of hybridization. In these hybrid environments, Islam-oriented groups develop interaction that are specific to these contexts. Here is an example of a Facebook chat exchange

between me and Khaoula about the Night of Destiny (*layla al-qadr*)³²⁰, a very significant event for her:

E—What is the Night of the Destiny³²¹?

K—[*sending a voice message*] Salam Nour, *labas? kulshi mezien?* [‘how are you doing? Everting’s fine?’ *in MA*] The Night of The Destiny it is when the holy Quran was given to the Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel... I will send it to you the corresponding sura... such a beautiful sura!

K—[*back to texting*] It is the night when Allah the Mighty [*her capitalization*] sent the Quran to the Prophet peace be upon Him [*her capitalization*]

E—Oh I see! What do you do during this night?

K—It is the most important night of Ramadan and for me as well!!

K—I stay awake all night until dawn ✨

K—praying and reciting the Quran as it is written 🙏

K—[*sending a voice message*] It is important to stay awake because it is not like any other night... I spend the night in the mosque with my other sisters... I must remain vigilant and pray to avoid any negative influence, as my destiny will be decided on this night.

K—[*back to texting*] the Night of the Destiny is sacred 🙏

K—and prayers are more powerful InshaAllah [*her capitalization*]

K—It is my favorite night of the year 🥰🥰🌟

E—Ohh 😊 I wish you a moment full of peace!

K—Alhamdulillah

³²⁰ *Layla al-qadr* is believed to be the night when the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is considered the holiest night in Islam and falls within the last ten days of Ramadan. This festivity is often observed on the 27th night but can vary each year according to the Islamic lunar calendar.

³²¹ The Night of Destiny is the translation used by Khaoula, but it is also found translated in other ways, such as The Night of Decree, The Night of Power, and The Night of Value, due to the different nuances of the Arabic word *qadr*.

“As the Night of the Destiny arrives, Khaoula sends me an animated GIF (fig. 20)³²² representing a night sky filled with sparkling stars and a crescent moon and a sun, with the Arabic text “Oh Allah, let us reach the Night of the Destiny” (*allahumma ballighnā layla al-qadr*) prominently displayed. In the center, a grand mosque with illuminated towers and a glowing blue dome stands against the backdrop of white clouds and small red hearts along the bottom edge”.

As highlighted in this excerpt from the April 2022 field journal, this GIF presents a communication system based on the coexistence of linguistic, graphic, iconic, and sound elements. This interaction is not an isolated case but represents the characteristic form of communication in the hybrid environments where it occurs. In the following pages, I will present a series of examples related to these types of communication, which reinforce the idea that the online sphere is neither separate from the offline one nor detached from the sociocultural context in which it is embedded. This interaction, characterized by the coexistence of multiple semiotic systems (natural languages, images, symbols, sounds, colors, and so on), seems to favor a process of translation, transmutation, reinterpretation, or even transformation of the meanings associated with these signs—a phenomenon known as resemiotization (O’Halloran, Tan, and Wignell 2016). Belonging to the fields of linguistics and semiotics, resemiotization is the process of transforming and reassigning meanings to signs and symbols across different contexts, media, or social practices (e.g., transcoding a text into an audio-visual product). Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative field data, this chapter explores how the hybridization of space contributes to the creation of forms of resemiotization that are shaped by the social actors who employ them, as well as by the social contexts in which they are embedded.

8.1 Communication Strategies

As discussed in the previous chapter, the social and spatial practices of Islam-oriented groups evolve through two criteria: mobility, enabled by the use of smartphones, and usability, provided by social media platforms. These factors promote the hybridization of spaces within these groups. However, this hybridization is not a one-way process. On the one hand, it facilitates the development of social and spatial practices; on the other hand, the social

³²² A GIF is a series of images or frames displayed in sequence to create a short, looping animation. GIFs can be shared on most instant messaging platforms.

dynamics—both individual and collective—that drive these practices also shape the hybridization itself. As a result, the hybridization that emerges is specific and contextual, reflecting the unique characteristics of Islam-oriented groups and the environments in which they operate. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into these practices, with a particular focus on the communication strategies that play a central role in their construction. Specifically, I will explore how certain strategies, such as the use of emojis, live videos, and photo sharing, are closely tied to both the social context and the technological tools at play, as well as how these tools are used and reappropriated by the social actors themselves.

The analysis of these communication strategies was conducted with a primary focus on interactions on Facebook, along with some on WhatsApp. Following the NEThnographic method³²³, qualitative analyses were carried out through participant observation and semi-structured interviews³²⁴, while quantitative analyses primarily relied on word frequency analysis using Python. However, due to the challenges in detecting symbols through Python, I also conducted a manual analysis to examine the content of the Islam-oriented Facebook pages discussed in this thesis. I selected and analyzed four posts per month from January 2020 to December 2022, resulting in 144 posts for each group over the 3-year period. The methodology employed follows a quantitative approach centered on categorizing post content based on thematic variables (e.g., the topic of the post) and the presence of multimedia elements (e.g., text, symbols, audiovisual material) as well as engagement metrics (e.g., likes, comments, shares). A systematic coding process was used, assigning binary values to facilitate comparative analysis across posts and to extract both qualitative and quantitative insights³²⁵.

8.1.1 *Emojis and Hashtags*

As highlighted in Chapter 7, the use of emojis and hashtags appears frequently and in varying ways and frequency in the posts of Islam-oriented groups. Emojis, which are small images or icons used to express emotions, objects, places, animals, and concepts, were invented in 1999 by a Japanese designer to enhance communication on mobile devices³²⁶. Hashtags, on the other hand, are words or phrases preceded by the symbol “#” first introduced in 2007 on

³²³ For an analysis of the NEThnographic method, see subchapter 3.3.






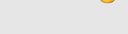


³²⁴ For a sample of the semi-structured questionnaires, see Appendix 8 and 9.

³²⁵ For a sample of the table used for thematic content categorization on Facebook, see Appendix 13.

³²⁶ The term “emoji” comes from Japanese and literally translates to “picture character”. Despite its similarity to the English word “emotion”, the term’s origin is not related to that meaning.

social media to tag and categorize content³²⁷. Emojis and hashtags became essential in digital communication in the early 2010s. Emojis spread globally with the integration of emoji keyboards on smartphones. Hashtags, made clickable by Twitter in 2009, spread to other social media platforms, helping organize and increase the visibility of content. These elements do not have universal usage but adapt to the sociocultural context of the users. The analysis of Facebook posts by Islam-oriented groups reveals different ways of using emojis and hashtags, highlighting varied approaches among the three groups.







The three Islam-oriented groups demonstrate distinct approaches in constructing their Facebook posts. During the interviews, it emerged that all three groups publish posts with text and images, as they are aware that posts without images have little chance of being read. Al-Amal uses short texts primarily in MSA and, less frequently, in MA³²⁸, accompanied by a series of emojis and hashtags (fig. 14)³²⁹. Hashtags, which are less common than emojis, are not always related to the specific themes discussed in the posts. The most common ones include the NGO’s name or general hashtags like #associative_work. (#al-’amal al-jam’awī) and #voluntary_work (#al-’amal al-taṭawu’ī) as well as hashtags with the names of specific projects or funding organizations. Emojis, on the other hand, are significantly more prevalent, appearing in 97% of the posts. Typically, they precede the text, as if introducing the theme, and are also used at the end, almost like a closing gesture. Often, they even replace individual words within sentences. Here are the key examples:





Emoji	Meaning
	“In shā’ allah”, “mā shā’ allah”, “bi-smi llah”, “al-ḥamdu lillah”, faith, Islam, Quran
	Al-Amal NGO, volunteers, teachers, Al-Amal president
	Volunteering work, teamwork, crowdfunding support, trainings, success
	Thanking, volunteering work, resilience
	Hope, strength, courage, dignity
	Link reference, attention-grabber, invitation to comment
	Al-Amal NGO, Al-Amal centers
	Al-Amal beneficiaries, children, adolescents, adults

³²⁷ The term “hashtag” is composed of “hash”, which is the informal name for the pound symbol (#), and “tag”, which in English means “label” or “marker”.

³²⁸ For a detailed percentage on the use of MA and MSA in the posts of Islam-oriented groups, see Appendix 16.

³²⁹ For a chart illustrating the frequency of emojis and hashtags in Al-Amal’s posts, see Appendix 17.

	Morocco, King, Patriotism
	Funders, national and international
	Blessing, opportunity, destiny
	Quran, recitation, prayer, faith, perseverance, constancy
	Ramadan, Islam, <i>haji</i>
	Newsletter, new information, goal to achieve

The use of hashtags in OREMA’s posts is quite widespread, appearing in 83% of the posts examined³³⁰. These hashtags, as we will see later, are specific to the content of the various posts, although their type does not vary significantly. OREMA tends to favor posts with extensive text written in MSA and, less frequently, in MA. On the other hand, it includes emojis in only 18% of its posts. The emojis identified are the flags of Morocco and Palestine, used to commemorate events with strong symbolic significance³³¹, as well as spider web and snowflake emojis used in specific cases, often at the beginning and at the end of phrases used as post titles, for instance  *al-multaqa al-dakhili li-tawasul wa-al-fa’aliyya 12*  or  *al-hiwār, al-’ilm, al-tajdīd, al-nahḍa* . According to interviews, these emojis replace the *rub’ al-ḥizb*³³² symbol, which is not available among the emojis on Facebook or WhatsApp.

The ulema’s posts, almost exclusively in MSA, are characterized by long texts without emojis, but with hashtags in 91% of the posts examined³³³. The most frequent hashtags are *#ṣallā_allahu_’alayhī_w_salam* (“May the blessings of Allah be upon him as well as peace”) and *#bismi_allāhi_al-raḥmani_al-raḥīmi* (“In the name of Allah the most gracious the most merciful”) (fig. 19). Both hashtags carry significant religious meaning: the first is a traditional blessing for the Prophet Muhammad, while the second, the *tasmīyya*, which indicate the name of the phrase used to open almost every sura in the Quran, but also the beginning of most daily actions for Muslims. These hashtags are not always written the same way (sometimes just the beginning of the *tasmīyya*, other times without the underscores, making the hashtag inactive), suggesting they are not intended to group posts into a category. What remains

³³⁰ For a graph illustrating the frequency of emojis and hashtags in OREMA’s posts, see Appendix 17.

³³¹ The Moroccan flag is used to commemorate the Green March of November 1975, see subchapter 5.3. The Palestinian flag is used to commemorate the Nakba, as explained by OREMA’s activists, which marks the violent displacement and dispossession of land, property, and belongings of around 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 Arab Israeli war.

³³² For an analysis of OREMA’s use of this symbol, see 8.2.1.

³³³ For a graph illustrating the frequency of emojis and hashtags the ulema’s posts, see Appendix 17.

consistent is their presence in most posts related to mosque photos, sometimes even appearing without accompanying text.

The content analysis of the posts shows a diversification in the communication strategies of Islam-oriented groups. Al-Amal focuses on promoting community events and activities, sharing motivational and educational messages, and providing updates on ongoing projects through images and infographics. OREMA publishes long texts about internal forums, group activities, exam sessions, official union statements, and event photos. The ulema council stands out for posts focused on seminars and religious activities, recognizing achievements and goals, and emphasizing national events like the Green March and the king's speeches. These contents reflect the different priorities and objectives of each group.

The use of emojis and hashtags in the posts shows that social media is used differently to convey specific messages, reflecting the diverse communication strategies and goals of the Islam-oriented groups. Al-Amal extensively uses emojis, creating an internal vocabulary that mirrors the daily experiences of the post creators and local trends in hashtag use. OREMA shows a similar trend but with fewer emojis and a preference for written text and hashtags to organize content and distinguish their section from others. The ulema do not use emojis, and their hashtags function almost as calls to action rather than thematic groupings. Section 8.2 will delve deeper into these trends through interviews with the actors involved.

8.1.2 *Photo Posting*

Al-Amal's posts feature 2-5 images showcasing the NGO's daily activities, infographics on relevant topics, or official documents such as council meeting minutes. Many photos show people looking directly at the camera, while others depict individuals participating in activities at Al-Amal centers, such as educational workshops, sports activities, or cooking classes. Numerous photos include the NGO logo and are personalized with frames displaying Al-Amal's Facebook and Instagram handles, along with other useful information like the center addresses or project names. On the other hand, OREMA uses standardized photos with consistent models and layouts nationwide. The comparative analysis of OREMA's page photos with those from sections such as Casablanca, Rabat, and Khenifra reveals that, particularly from 2020 onward, there has been a notable homogenization of photos across sections, characterized by the use of consistent fonts and similar frames. Both Al-Amal and OREMA have a similar approach to publishing photos on their Facebook pages, using well-framed images that capture key moments of the group's activities. The photos often highlight

significant events, participants in action, and achieved results, all with a consistent aesthetic that reflects the group’s visual identity.

While Al-Amal and OREMA take a standard approach to their photos, the ulema adopts an alternative method. Among the 144 posts examined between 2020 and 2022, 95 contain photos taken inside the mosque, a sacred place that is usually not photographed. Additionally, 70% of these photos include the hashtag Bismillah, even when they do not capture moments of prayer or events directly related to the Quran. The photos are typically taken from the perspective of the audience (fig. 21), aiming not to disturb the speaker and to make the viewer feel as if they are part of the event³³⁴. Out of the 95 photos, 52 depict female activities and 43 male activities. This is due to a pragmatic reason: Khaoula, who manages the ulema’s Facebook page, being a woman, cannot photograph the male areas of the mosque. Therefore, photos of male activities are taken by mosque attendees, sent to the council’s Facebook page, and then published by Khaoula. In contrast, photos of female activities are taken directly by Khaoula herself. This process partly explains the greater number of photos of female activities. Additionally, as will be further explored in 8.2.2, this is also linked to the council’s internal policy aimed at highlighting the activities of the women’s unit of the Ulema.



Fig. 21 Photo post showing an imam delivering a sermon (left) and women participating in a seminar (right) at the Fnideq mosque. Mosque of Fnideq, Ulema’s Facebook page, April and July 2021. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

8.1.3 Live Videos

The use of live videos in groups oriented towards Islam shows considerable variation. To analyze this variation, I decided to include the year 2019 in my quantitative analysis of group posts to compare the usage of video before and after the pandemic. For instance, the

³³⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of the ulema’s photo posting practices, see 8.2.2.

ulema council didn't have a Facebook page in 2019 but established one in 2020 to promote their Quran recitation WhatsApp group and share podcasts and videos from their YouTube channel. Notably, the council does not stream live on Facebook but instead records videos and later uploads them to YouTube or posts them on their Facebook page. During 2020, as mosque activities were halted, some posts included YouTube links that directed users to the ulema channel or similar ones. There was also a plethora of audio content from Quran reading sites. Out of 28 posts collected in 2020 from the ulema page (which launched in May 2020), 20 were linked to podcasts and YouTube videos, while 8 were photos.

During the pandemic, Al-Amal utilized video conferencing platforms to continue its seminars and workshops. According to interviews, some of these seminars were open to the public, while others were exclusively for Al-Amal users³³⁵. In 2021, the organization continued to broadcast some of its training sessions live, which were sometimes conducted in a hybrid format. However, from 2022, there was a noticeable decline in the use of Facebook videos, as the NGO shifted towards a more consistent use of Instagram. Previously noted, Al-Amal skillfully employs visual storytelling through video testimonials from beneficiaries, volunteers, and partners to underscore the impact of their projects. Instagram Reels, which are brief video clips, offer a format distinct from live videos and are primarily used not for hosting the NGO's activities but for communicating and promoting its projects. Al-Amal's communication strategy therefore heavily incorporates Instagram for visual storytelling, ensuring a robust digital presence that enhances its community-centered initiatives.

OREMA was already utilizing live streaming well before the onset of the pandemic. As detailed in section 7.2.2, the group started using live video to broadcast their activities, particularly their internal forums, as early as 2018. OREMA's approach during their internal forums provides insights into the evolving dynamics of interaction and participation through live video. As previously analyzed, the shift to fully online events during the pandemic underscored the group's adaptability and resilience. Utilizing platforms like Facebook, Zoom, and Google Meet for live streaming, OREMA successfully continued to hold internal forums, actively engaging students in debates and discussions despite the constraints imposed by physical distancing.

The elements of interactions during the *ḥalqa* have been adapted for online settings. While in the offline *ḥalqa*, anyone was allowed to enter the circle and speak, direct access to

³³⁵ In 2020, a total of five seminars were organized exclusively for users, two of which were conducted solely through live video sessions.

online conferencing platform during a live video posed technical challenges³³⁶. As a result, in the online *halqa*, real-time written comments have replaced oral debates, and digital images have emerged as new ways for participants to engage. The speakers of the online *halqa* cannot engage in direct debate with the commenters but can respond orally by reading the comments during the live session or later in writing after the session has ended. Both the live videos of the *halqa* and the related comments remain visible in the “Live” section of the Facebook page, allowing viewers to “relive” the *halqa* and respond or comment afterward. Finally, being a live session open to public, the influence of the online *halqa* extends beyond the student population.

8.2 Forms of Resemiotization

In the following pages, I propose the hypothesis that the communication strategies described in subchapter 8.1, characteristic of the hybrid environments in which they are generated, facilitate the transposition and transformation of information and ideas across various communication systems. This process is known as *resemiotization*. Linguist Roman Jakobson first explored this phenomenon, defining it as “intersemiotic translation”, which refers to interpreting linguistic signs through non-linguistic signs, as seen in artistic performances that blend visual and auditory elements (Jakobson 1959). Semiologist Umberto Eco expands on this concept by describing intersemiotic translation as an adaptation across various semiotic systems that significantly alters the form and meaning of a sign to align with new cultural and semiotic conventions. *Resemiotization* thus entails not only a transformation of form but also a shift in context, which may preserve or modify the original meaning of the sign (Eco 2003). This phenomenon is particularly evident in digitalization, where information is converted from a physical format into a digital one. Drawing on qualitative data, I aim to examine in the following pages how crossing practices discussed in subchapter 7.2 and the communication strategies outlined in subchapter 8.1 lead to forms of *resemiotization*. As previously mentioned, this process is not straightforward but involves a continuous interplay between social and spatial practices, the contexts in which they are performed, the individual and collective perceptions of these practices, and the tools at play in the production and diffusion of these practices.

³³⁶ On Zoom, the maximum number of participants ranges from 100 to 1,000, depending on the paid subscription. On Google Meet, it ranges from 100 to 250 participants, also based on the subscription plan.

8.2.1 From Saying to Expressing

When I ask Meryam about her frequent use of emojis and hashtags on Al-Amal’s page, she responds with a smile, “It is just how I express myself; I’ve gotten used to it and can’t do without it!” Her response underscores the almost mechanical nature of her communication—an internalized reflex that operates automatically. However, this tendency is not merely an unconscious reflex due to her extensive use of social media; it is also the result of a learning process. Meryam has effectively integrated traditional digital communication techniques, thanks to her academic and professional background³³⁷: “A post with text alone will never get read! You need to incorporate visual, positive, and colorful elements, or else it will just blend in with the myriads of posts on social media. The text must always be clear, simple, and impactful, and emojis captivate attention and interest... It is important to keep our supporters constantly engaged”. Sharing how she learned the importance of varying communication methods to capture the audience’s attention, she emphasizes how the use of emojis in crowdfunding messages and awareness campaigns has increased interaction and donations”.

Emojis also mirror the emotions Meryam experiences. During a pastry training session for young adults at the CSD, Meryam moves between tables where participants are busy decorating cupcakes, capturing the event with photos and short videos. She consistently uploads this content to social media, primarily through Instagram reels and Facebook posts. In her post descriptions, she details the event, its organizer, and promoter, adding, “We believe that young people are a source of energy and creativity 🌟🍌”. When I ask her about the choice of these emojis, she responds: “I want to transmit the energy that these young people are releasing into this room... and the blessing (*baraka*) that Allah has bestowed upon these youths”. Meryam’s personal emotions experienced during the workshop are transformed into images and conveyed online through emojis.

OREMA adopts a distinct approach to emojis, using them sparingly and only under specific circumstances, such as with the Moroccan flags for commemoration of the Green March and Palestinian flags for the commemoration of the Nakba. On the same days when these events are commemorated with posts on Facebook, similar celebrations are also organized on campus. These often feature the Palestinian flag prominently displayed at the center of *halaqāt* in the campus squares. When questioned about this practice, some members

³³⁷ I was unable to personally verify this information, but it is reported that the 2021 crowdfunding campaign, which was managed with a more effective digital strategy, successfully met its financial goal. On the other hand, the 2020 campaign, lacking in adequate digital communication, did not succeed. However, this failure may also be attributed to the highly uncertain socio-political and health environment brought about by the pandemic.

of the group highlight the importance of displaying the Palestinian flag both online and offline: Brahim, a third-year chemistry student and activist, explains, “Just as we carry Palestinian flags on our shoulders, they must also be present on our social media, so everyone understands our stance”. Just as physical spaces are adorned, so too are digital ones.

OREMA activists emphasize that it serves not only as a symbol of solidarity but also as a reassertion of an “Arab identity that is anti-Israeli, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial”. Additionally, it aims to draw attention to a “longstanding political and humanitarian issue”. In this regard, OREMA’s use of flag emojis in their social media posts is a deliberate choice to quickly and visually communicate the group’s positions, thus enhancing awareness and support among their followers. Adorning both physical and digital spaces with symbols that carry cultural, social, or political significance not only strengthens the visual identity and message of the organization but also highlights the seamless integration between the physical and digital realms. Thus, discourses and practices are reconfigured to suit this hybrid context.

The use of emojis that evoke the *rub‘ al-hizb* symbol is a notable example of how symbols are reinterpreted across different contexts. This symbol, identifiable by its octagonal shape with a double overlay of squares (◈), is traditionally used to mark the end of a section of the Quran, facilitating its recitation³³⁸. Fatima explains to me that since this symbol is not available in Facebook’s emoji keyboard, alternative representations such as spider webs emoji (🕸) are used because their eight points more closely resemble the *rub‘ al-hizb*; however, snowflakes emojis (❄) are more commonly used, as they are perceived to be more “noble” despite less resembling the symbol. When asked about the potential confusion caused by using emojis that does not match closely the symbol, OREMA activists clarify that these replacement emojis are mainly intended for those who are already familiar with the symbol, whether because they follow the group’s social media or engage with other online contexts where the symbol is used.

As evidenced by interviews, even though the emojis used were not explicitly related to the original symbol, they evoked a recognizable meaning for those familiar with it. This type of adaptation effectively communicates with an audience that understands the nuanced significance behind these symbols, often connected to specific cultural, religious, and generational contexts. As will be further explored, the use of emojis to evoke other symbols demonstrates how digital communication can leverage alternative visual representations to

³³⁸ With “*rub*” meaning “quarter” and “*hizb*” meaning “section” or “part”, the term “*rub‘ al-hizb*” refers to a quarter of a section, as the symbol is used to mark the completion of a quarter of a specific part of the Quran. It is a prominent geometric and symbolic figure in Islamic culture, though the geometrical pattern including hexagons and octagons can be found in other cultures of the Mediterranean area (e.g., the Greek civilization), indicating an important cultural *mélange* existing in the region.

maintain relevance and intelligibility within specific communities³³⁹. In addition to the re-symbolization of the *rub‘ al-hizb*, its meaning is also recontextualized. Originally a religious calligraphic or architectural symbol, it is now used by OREMA activists to “decorate” or “embellish” symbolically significant phrases in posts promoting key events for the group. It is the case of snowflakes emoji adorning OREMA’s national slogan, “❄️ *al-ḥiwār, al-’ilm, al-tajdīd, al-naḥḍa* ❄️” (“dialogue, science, renewal, renaissance”).

Although limited, the use of emoji on OREMA’s Facebook page underscores their importance as tools for symbolic recognition within a specific community and for enhancing the aesthetic value of shared social spaces, both online and offline. In commenting on emojis’ use, many OREMA activists consider emojis “silly” or “inappropriate” for the content shared by OREMA online. They view these caricatural or awkward images as misaligned with the “seriousness” of OREMA’s posts, which often address ethical, religious, political, and societal issues, or sensitive claims within the university. This restrained presence of emojis also reflects a communication strategy with centralized guidelines for all OREMA sections regarding what and how to post on social media. Fatima explains this centralization while assigning hashtags to a post. She reviews previous posts on OREMA Tétouan’s page to recall which hashtags to use, then checks OREMA Kenitra’s page, and says, “I can’t just write anything or choose any random hashtag”. Hashtags are indeed standardized according to specific models: hashtags featuring the name of the union and the corresponding section, names and titles of events, the union’s slogan, and affiliated groups during featured events. This standardization facilitates the grouping of content in OREMA’s online communication, providing the union with a sense of homogeneity, coherence, and organization. After choosing the right hashtag, Fatima comments, “Our profile needs to be consistent with the other sections of OREMA, so we are more credible and visible”.

8.2.2 *From Being There to Looking At*

Most posts on the ulema’s Facebook page contain hashtags related to the Hadith or the Quran. This frequent recurrence, even in posts not directly connected to references to sacred texts or direct mentions of the Prophet Muhammad, prompted me to question the council about it. Khaoula explains: “This page documents the mosque, so we must use phrases that respect the place... If I used a random hashtag, the photo could be seen in inappropriate contexts... while if I use these hashtags [*pointing to her phone*], the photo will be placed in

³³⁹ For an extended analysis on OREMA’s uses of emoji, see 8.3.2.

appropriate contexts...” Khaoula continues, “Often, during the council’s seminars or sermons, references are made to the Prophet Muhammad, and even though the words of the imams or ulema cannot be heard through a post, the Hadith teaches us to bless his name every time it is mentioned by saying *ṣalla allahu ‘alaih w-salam* [“may the blessings of Allah be upon him as well as peace”]... That’s why we choose this hashtag”. Nodding in agreement, Tariq elaborates on Khaoula’s point.

T—“It is like when you [*pointing at me*] go to church and make the sign of the cross once entered out of devotion for the Prophet *‘Isā*, that you call Jesus... entering a mosque is the same, it is a sacred place that must be respected... On our Facebook page, it is the same, we accompany a photo of a sacred place with a sacred word, so that when the reader sees the post, they mentally recite “*bismi allāhi al-raḥmani al-raḥīmi*”.

E—“It is interesting what you are saying. It seems like the Facebook page isn’t separate from the physical space of the mosque...”

T—“If you like [*laughing*] yes... well, the mosque remains the most important place for a Muslim to express their faith and fulfill their duties. Our Facebook page is more of a showcase... no, it is more like a window into the mosque and the council’s activities! Through this window, the faithful can see what’s happening and eventually decide to cross the threshold”.

The perception described by Tariq is evident in the photos that Khaoula posts daily on the page. My analysis of the ulema posts from 2020 to 2022 reveals that most photos are taken from the audience’s perspective, with fewer taken from an external viewpoint or that of the speakers. The photos are often vertical and of average quality; some even include a watermark with the name and model of the smartphone used, indicating that they are almost always taken with mobile devices. Posed photos are rare, and when subjects are posing, it is typically at the end of events, or in ceremonial occasions, such as when council members present awards to speakers (e.g., books on philosophy, Islamic theology, or local and national history) or rewards to participants (e.g., prizes given after Quran recitation competitions). Indeed, these photographs capture everyday moments within the mosque and the ulema council, serving as “windows”, as Tariq described.

I observed Khaoula taking photos during an event inside a mosque only once. This was in Fnideq during a seminar held by the Women’s and Family Affairs Unit. Khaoula primarily

takes photos at the beginning and the end of the seminar. When she brings out her smartphone to take pictures, some participants, noticing her action, adjust their veils and clothes, assuming more appropriate poses, such as crossing their legs and covering their feet and ankles with their djellabas. When asked why she doesn't prefer posed photos, Khaoula explains that the goal is not to focus on appearances but to showcase the activity and dedication of the participants. Other participants also take photos of the room, with selfies being rare and typically taken only at the end of the sermons.

Before the event, I ask Khaoula for permission to take photos and she responds “*marḥaban* (“you are welcome”)! I’ll post your photos on the page”. While sending her my photos via WhatsApp, I take the opportunity to ask what she aims to show in her own photos: “Nothing in particular”, she replies, “just what’s happening in the room... If there are a lot of people, I try to show the number of participants... and the beauty of our mosque... just the atmosphere in the room I think”. After I send her the photos, Khaoula selects one taken from the back of the room that shows both the participants and the speaker³⁴⁰ and a posed photo of the speaker with some women who were awarded copies of the Quran for their recitation.

After obtaining permission to photograph the seminar, I returned to question the council about the prohibition in Morocco on photographing or entering (for non-Muslims) sacred places³⁴¹. We discuss iconoclasm in Sunni Islamic tradition and the differences between Islamic and Christian traditions regarding the representation of sacred images. I then focus on the personal experiences of my interlocutors, asking, “Who, in your opinion, can take photos or videos inside a mosque, and when?” Most of the responses emphasize that legitimacy depends on the intention and timing. I am told, “Even if respectful, the intent of non-Muslims to photograph sacred places is not appropriate because those who do not know Islam cannot understand what is suitable to do inside a sacred place”. They also mention that “photos can cause distraction or be disrespectful to the devotion and spirituality of the place” and that “there are right and wrong times to take photos”. Finally, they discuss the impossibility of limiting the circulation of images of sacred places today. On this topic, Abdelkader, a senior member of the council, and Tariq commented the following:

A—“Today it is very difficult to limit images’ circulation... For example, there are so many pictures of the Kaaba, now... but it is up to the behavior of a good Muslim to refrain from actions and thoughts that are considered *ḥarām* [“illicit”] ... the ulema

³⁴⁰ This photo is included in this thesis as the cover image for Part 3.

³⁴¹ As a non-Muslim woman, I was only allowed to be in the women’s section, not the main prayer hall.

guide these actions and thought, and our social media must represent this guidance. What is written and photographed there conforms to the scriptures and the teachings of Islam and it is addressed to the *umma* [...] These photos and videos you see here [*pointing to his smartphone*] These photos and videos you see here are *halāl* [“licit”] because... because the mosque is sacred and this is why the space cannot be desecrated... it is the “*ḥarām al-jam ‘iyya*” [“the sacredness of the mosque”] [...] The images serve those who have already experienced those moments to be reminded of those experiences. Those who have never entered a mosque see the photos and don’t understand what is happening, while those who have been initiated see the images and feel called. [...] You see, what is important is not just what you see when you are looking, but what you feel while you are looking”.

T—“[*Nodding in agreement*] Today, it is much easier to access all kinds of information, but it is much harder to determine if this information is right or wrong. Our page serves as a platform to educate the faithful, to remind them of the core values and principles of Islam. To guide them in the right direction”

E—“And what is the direction?”

T—“The direction of the of the scriptures, the Quran and the Sunna...”

E—“But there are many interpretations of the sacred texts. How does one know which one is correct?”

T—“This is precisely our role! The guidance and direction that we, the Ulema, provide are deeply rooted in the religion, history, and traditions of Morocco. Many Muslims hear many things on the Internet... extremist preachers... radicals... just because they are charismatic! But they are ignorant, as they don’t understand that Islam is a religion of peace, as His majesty the king, may Allah assist him, emphasizes. Here in Morocco, it is different! Our role is to spread the right messages... balance, peace, tolerance... brotherhood... these are essential values for the stability and prosperity”.

This conversation with Abdelkader and Tariq offers valuable insights into the role and use of the ulema’s Facebook page, shedding light on various aspects of how online space is sacralized. The virtual portrayal of the mosque seems to adhere to the same normative framework that governs the physical space of the religious building. Indeed, when Abdelkader evokes the concept of “*ḥarām al-jam ‘iyya*”, he is referring to a set of the religious norms that govern Islamic sites, directly derived from “*ḥarām al-makka*”, which represents the sanctity of

the mosque in Mecca, one of Islam's holiest sites. The *harām* space evokes a set of representations and practices centered on dichotomies such as boundary and transition (inside/outside), social and gender organization (male spaces/female spaces), and licit versus illicit practices (words, gestures, clothing). These dichotomies, found not only in Islam but in all forms of worship, serve to facilitate mutual recognition among those who frequent these spaces, also based on a binary distinction, such as that between believers and non-believers (Cattedra and Idrissi-Janati 2003).

The implications of this normative structure are significant. First, there is a deliberate effort to transpose the set of written and unwritten rules that the community has internalized through their experience of the physical space into the virtual environment, accessible primarily through photos. In this context, the “decoration” of the Facebook page with symbols that are reinterpreted and imbued with new meanings and functions, such as hashtags reciting the *tasmiyya*, serves to invoke these specific codes of conduct. This process of resemiotization through signs' transcoding serves two primary purposes. On the one hand, it grants the online space the same authority as the offline space in the eyes of its users, thereby legitimizing all interactions that occur within it. On the other hand, it fosters a sense of belonging, rooted in the community's ability to understand and interpret these signs.

In this context, only those who possess the necessary social codes can fully grasp and appreciate the atmosphere being evoked, as Abdelkader points out with the comments, “what is important is not just what you see when you are looking, but what you feel while you are looking”. The blurry or poorly defined nature of the images and videos is not due to a lack of care in capturing them, but rather because their purpose is neither descriptive nor explanatory. Instead, they are intended to evoke individual and collective memories associated with the physical experience of the mosque. In other words, these virtual representations aim at evoking the lived experience of those who have physically visited the sacred space, rekindling an emotional and spiritual connection to the mosque's environment. By using symbols and images, a boundary is drawn between those who have practiced this social and spatial context and those who have not. In this sense, social media does not necessarily introduce new forms of religious socialization; rather, it consolidates and amplifies existing ones, reinforcing pre-established connections within the community.

The images of the mosque shared on the ulema's Facebook page are not intended to openly reveal the sanctity of the place, but rather to evoke it. As I will elaborate in the following pages, these photos demonstrate a mechanism of “present absence”³⁴²: while the sacred space

³⁴² For a discussion on the concept of “present absence”, see 8.3.2.

is visible in the image, its meaning (its sacredness) is not explicitly depicted. This sense of the sacred can only be fully grasped by those who have had a direct, personal experience of the place. At the same time, for the viewer, the sacred object is physically absent, as the photo is its visual representation. However, its sacredness is conveyed through the memory of the lived experience: it is the recollection of that memory that allows the viewer to perceive the sacred, even without physically being in the space (Bromberger 1990). Hence, the ulema's Facebook page does not merely replicate the sacred space, but also redefines it, creating continuity between the physical mosque and its digital representation. At the same time, it reinforces the existing hierarchies within the community. The page's role goes beyond the simple dissemination of religious content; it becomes a tool for legitimization and for constructing a collective identity that is deeply rooted in the physical sacred space, but that finds new expressions and meanings within the online sphere.

On this matter, anthropologist Katia Boissevain, in a co-edited volume on the touristic uses of religious culture in the Maghreb, emphasizes how "touristified" populations, rather than being passive subjects of a phenomenon beyond their control, actively manage what is revealed and what is concealed from tourists regarding religious practices (Boissevain 2010, 17). In a similar way, the ulema negotiate the representation of the mosque's sacredness in the online public space, adopting new forms that mirror those used in the offline world. While in the physical space of the mosque, the doors are closed to non-Muslims, in the virtual space of the Facebook page, these "doors" are always open. However, what is displayed within is revealed or concealed depending on the gaze of the viewer. This dynamic of revealing and concealing is not accidental but is intentionally produced by social actors through the use of specific signs, such as hashtags, language choices, and specific images' framing. These elements reflect strategies of negotiation and adaptation, used to define and maintain the boundaries of the sacred space within the online sphere. By controlling what is made visible and what remains hidden, these actors actively shape how the sacred space is perceived and experienced in the digital context.

8.2.3 *From Lived Experiences to Live Experiences*

As highlighted previously, Islam-oriented groups use audio-visual media and tools in varying forms³⁴³. The ulema record seminars and then upload them to their YouTube channel,

³⁴³ For a detailed analysis of the use of audio-visual media among Islam-oriented groups, see subchapters 7.2 and 8.1.

send them via WhatsApp, or post them on their Facebook page, eventually with audio and video edits. During the pandemic, Al-Amal used videoconferencing for workshops, some of which were open to the public using Facebook's live videos, while others were reserved for members and thus not posted on Facebook. OREMA, in contrast, had been using live streaming even before the pandemic. Since 2018, it had been broadcasting its offline activities live. During the pandemic, the group quickly transitioned its events to an online format, making extensive use of Facebook live videos. The adaptation of events to online formats, particularly during the pandemic, introduced new methods of interaction within the *ḥalqa*. I then questioned OREMA members about their lived experiences of the *ḥalqa* at the university and their live experiences of the *ḥalqa* on Facebook.

The content of the *ḥalqa*, whether online or offline, remains largely consistent, focusing on topics such as education, Islamic culture, civic activism, and political issues. However, the modes of interaction differ significantly. In-person *ḥalaqāt*, oratory skills are highly valued by group members, often more so than the actual content of the speech. Issam, a 23-year-old biology student and activist who has attended numerous *ḥalaqāt*, explains, "An orator's ideas might be good, and their values right... but if they can't speak well... if they're not clear... the audience will lose interest". This sentiment is widely shared among group members, especially the orators, who use common techniques to enhance their performance in *ḥalaqāt*. For example, during live sessions, orators frequently employ expressive body language and rhetorical techniques to engage the audience effectively.

According to interviews and participant observations, orators employ various gestures to emphasize key points. For instance, raising the right index finger to the sky symbolizes strength and admonition, while opening the palm conveys inclusivity and transcendence. Body movements, such as walking in a circle within the *ḥalqa* and turning toward different parts of the audience, combined with maintaining eye contact, help establish a personal connection, create a sense of dynamism, and keep the audience engaged. Rhetorical techniques, such as repeating key phrases, such as "*khūṭī w khuwātātī*" ("my brothers and sisters" in MA) or using the collective "we", and varying the tone of voice, are used to maintain attention and underscore different aspects of the speech.

These rhetorical techniques foster a cohesive dynamic between the speakers and the audience, who are frequently called upon to respond both verbally and non-verbally. For instance, the audience actively engages by echoing the speakers' slogans or by making gestures such as forming the "V" for victory with their fingers or raising their right fist in solidarity. The interactions in an offline *ḥalqa* are immediate and direct, allowing participants to intervene,

pose questions to the orators, and receive answers in real-time. The ability to speak effectively and persuasively is highly valued in bolstering the group's visibility and strength: "The more you're capable of speaking, the more you will attract sympathizers in the *ḥalqa*, drawing them to the group's cause... and the more visible you will become within the university", Brahim comments with a smile. "A *ḥalqa* that spills over into the main square of the campus is far more impressive than a small *ḥalqa* with just five people".

On the other hand, in the online *ḥalqa*, the importance of oratory diminishes in favor of written and visual communication. During Facebook live videos, written comments from the audience become the primary means of interaction. During lockdown, Hasna, Yusuf, and Hussein, senior OREMA activists aged between 27 and 29, organize an online *ḥalqa* with a historian specializing in Palestine. The discussion begins with a two-minute video featuring footage of violence by Israeli forces against Muslim worshippers gathered at the Al-Aqsa Mosque complex for the first Friday prayers. The video is accompanied by a traditional Palestinian song honoring the martyrs (*shuhadā'*) of the conflict³⁴⁴. The video reaches about 1,000 views and receives 379 comments—far more than an offline *ḥalqa*, which usually sees no more than ten audience interventions. Most participants in the live session leave comments asking questions to the speakers or expressing opinions, prayers, and thanks through text and emojis. However, the speakers do not respond to all the comments, selecting only six to address at the end of the online *ḥalqa*. This type of interaction alters the dynamics of the *ḥalqa*, increasing audience participation but reducing the immediacy and frequency of debate between the audience and speakers. Additionally, as the debate shifts from verbal to written form, the centrality of rhetoric in the online *ḥalqa* is diminished. Hussein and Yusuf comment on this change as follows:

H—"I lose my ability to speak effectively in front of a screen [*she laughs*] ... there's no one there... I can't feel the strength of our activists and supporters... but I know that continuing [*the ḥalqa*] is our mission"

³⁴⁴ This event took place on January 31, 2020, when Muslim worshippers gathered at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound for Friday prayers. During the assembly, Israeli forces intervened using rubber-coated steel bullets, resulting in numerous injuries. The incident occurred amidst heightened tensions following then-U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement, in December 2017, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital," which had sparked widespread protests and clashes in the region. For further details, see Ibrahim Arwa "Not an inch: Palestinians at Al-Aqsa vow to fight Trump's plan", *Al Jazeera*, January 30, 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/31/not-an-inch-palestinians-at-al-aqsa-vow-to-fight-trumps-plan>

Y—“During COVID, we invited many excellent speakers—Imams, Ulema, experts in societal issues, religion, politics, health... from Egypt, Spain, France, America... This helped increase our viewership. [...] It is easier to attract supporters on the university campus, but it is much more challenging to do so in the vast arena of social media. Even if our messages are correct and persuasive, it is difficult to reach such distant ears!”

H—“And also our supporters follow so many other pages and profiles... when do they have time to read and watch everything? On campus, it is different because OREMA is the only focus!”

Yusuf and Hussein raise the issue of the mechanisms that promote visibility in both online and offline spaces. What draws people to watch videos online is not so much the rhetorical skill of the speakers as it is Facebook’s algorithm that suggests content to them. In offline *halaqāt*, people could pass by the campus, stop to listen, and increase the number of participants. This spontaneous and immediate element of attraction is lost in the online dimension, where the visibility of a video depends primarily on interaction with the platform’s algorithm. If a page doesn’t have enough likes or if users haven’t activated notifications, the chances of a video being seen decrease significantly. The reliance on social media algorithms introduces an element of randomness and dispersion, making it harder to reach a broad audience. Paradoxically, within the confined space of the university, the potential to attract more people was greater compared to the vast and scattered reach of the Internet.

Yusuf highlights another crucial point: the ability to invite well-known and influential individuals to online *halaqāt*, even if they are located far from Tétouan. The presence of notable guests, whose names are prominently featured in the live video title, makes it immediately visible when scrolling through OREMA’s page, becomes a key factor in boosting the event’s appeal and visibility. This is reflected in the communication strategy adopted by OREMA starting from 2020, which includes promotional posts featuring the names and photos of guests, along with the time and title of the event. These posts not only announce the event but also create anticipation and expectation, which can lead to higher viewership.

In online *halaqāt*, both verbal and non-verbal dimensions take on new characteristics through digital mediation. Interviews reveal that the rhetorical aspect loses some of its effectiveness, while the non-verbal component transforms into new forms of written and visual communication. Comments like “*mā shā’ allah*”, “*bi-smi llah*”, “*al-hamdu lillah*” found written in Latin characters and Arabic characters (e.g., “MachaAllah”, “Machallah”, “Macha Allah”, “Bismilla”, “Bismillah”, “Hamdulillah” “Amdulillah”), along with emojis of folded

hands, V-signs, green and red hearts, and flags, replace the non-verbal cues often present in offline *ḥalaqāt*, such as the V-sign, raised fists, or hands clasped in prayer. This transformation shifts the focus from rhetorical skill and the expressive variety of body language to codified visual or written signs. Additionally, the online sessions remain available on the Facebook page, allowing users to rewatch them and continue the discussion in the comments, creating an ongoing and open debate even after the live stream ends.

These parameters become central in online *ḥalaqāt*, altering the relationship between speakers and the audience from a structure centered on a single point—the speaker—to a network distributed among all participants. This type of interaction increases audience participation but reduces the immediacy and frequency of the debate between the audience and speakers. From a centralized oratory practice, the online *ḥalqa* becomes a digitally mediated and decentralized one. To understand how this shift affects viewers, I distributed a closed-ended questionnaire to around twenty users, selected from three online *ḥalqa* videos in 2020. The questionnaire aimed to explore various aspects of this transition, with questions like “To what extent do you think written comments during the live session influence your attention compared to the speaker?” or “How often do you interact with other participants’ comments compared to how you would in an offline *ḥalqa*?” The results suggest that attention does indeed shift from the speaker to the real-time comments posted on the video.

8.3 Resemiotization of Interaction

Interviews and observations with various social actors reveal that Islam-oriented groups’ communication strategies are profoundly influenced by the unique hybridization of their social and spatial contexts. These strategies are not merely the result of using specific tools; they also reflect the cultural, educational, social, and generational traits of the individuals involved in these interactions. These interactions, rather than being a mere transfer of discourses and practices from offline to online, generate a continuous mutual transformation of sense and meaning, thus revealing a process of resemitotization.

This perspective aligns with the approach of semioticians such as Jurij Lotman and Umberto Eco, who view translation not as a simple transposition of ideas and concepts, but as a “generator of sense”, creating a semiotic space where languages interact (Eco 2003; Lotman 1995 in Eco 2003). Within this framework, users interact with the translation through reading, observing, or listening, bringing their own experiences and knowledge to its

interpretation. By engaging with the original text in this way, they participate in the creation of meaning and contribute to the continuous evolution of sense.

I argue that this process occurs not only in the context of translation but also in the socio-cultural settings central to my research. In the following paragraphs, I will analyze the previously presented qualitative data on the interactions of Islam-oriented groups to illustrate how these dynamics contribute to a process of resemiotization. The examination of the data reveals two key elements that define this process: literacy and adaptation. These aspects are deeply interconnected and play a crucial role in how Islam-oriented groups adapt and respond to changes in their communicative contexts.

8.3.1 *Literacy*

Resemiotization involves a transformation of signs and their meanings across various semiotic systems. This transformation requires the cultivation of specialized skills appropriate to each semiotic system and the cultural contexts in which these changes occur. The acquisition of these skills is analogous to a process of literacy, defined as the initiation into understanding a particular language distinctive of a specific system, technology, or discipline (Dusi 2015). Similarly, the skills that my interlocutors developed through interactions in hybrid spaces can be assimilated with this form of literacy. This understanding equips individuals to decode, encode, and actively engage in specific contexts.

The differentiated use of Facebook pages by Islam-oriented groups highlights distinct forms of digital literacy unique to each group. This variety in learning demonstrates that, although social media platforms provide a standardized structure concerning communication, the individual and collective adaptation of their functionalities can transform them into adaptable environments according to various socio-cultural contexts. Thus, Facebook pages become not only communication tools but also expressive spaces that reflect and reinforce the identity and internal dynamics of each group. The unique ways in which the Facebook platform is utilized also reflect specific learning processes.

Al-Amal employs a communication strategy designed to evoke empathy and engagement, given its focus on supporting children, single women, and poor families, and combating domestic violence. In online environments, where face-to-face interactions are impossible, the NGO must adapt these techniques to maintain its emotional impact. This adaptation involved learning new forms of expression through emojis. In Al-Amal's communication, emojis not only enhance the message but also introduce a new form of visual literacy, essential for ensuring that the organization's emotional intentions and content are

clearly conveyed. In other terms, emoji literacy enables Al-Amal to express emotional and contextual complexities that text alone cannot convey.

In this sense, emojis serve as semiotic bridges, rapidly transmitting emotions and feelings crucial for awareness and engagement, particularly in social support and crowdfunding campaigns. Thus, to not only communicate information but also convey cultural values and sensitivities, Al-Amal has undergone a learning process that has primarily, but not exclusively, involved the use of emojis. This literacy in emoji communication is the result of both collective decisions by the NGO, which funded online communication training courses for Meryam, and Meryam's individual socialization, developed through her daily use of social media.

OREMA's use of emojis, though sporadic, highlights a crucial aspect of the literacy process that characterizes resemiotization. While emojis are designed to be intelligible to anyone online, their meanings can be recontextualized. This is evident when OREMA uses emojis to evoke and reconfigure specific symbols, such as the *rub' al-hizb*, with other graphic signs. Unlike their typical purpose, OREMA's emojis are comprehensible only to those who have learned the group's specific way of online communication. In this case, literacy extends beyond understanding the technology; it encompasses the ability to decode the cultural and symbolic meanings that emojis convey in specific contexts. OREMA's selective and symbolic use of emojis shows how online communication strategies are intertwined with the unique cultural and social practices of a community. This underscores how the process of digital literacy is not standardized according to the universalized communication norms of social media; instead, it is contextualized and intricately linked to the specific environments in which it is applied.

As with the use of emojis in OREMA, the use of hashtags on the ulema's Facebook page exemplifies how digital literacy can deviate from conventional Internet norms to adapt to specific cultural contexts. While hashtags are typically used to categorize and organize digital content, making it easier to search and aggregate information on social platforms, on the Ulema's page they are employed in ways that reflect rhetorical forms inherent to Islamic tradition, such as the Bismillah recitation. This approach underscores the cultural and religious significance underlying the learning process of using hashtags aiming to reflect and reinforce cultural identities and practices. Thus, digital literacy extends beyond the mere acquisition of technical skills to include how contextual socio-cultural practices serve as criteria for learning new forms of expression (Androutsopoulos 2011).

Digital literacy goes beyond the mere acquisition of technical skills for effective online navigation; it fundamentally transforms how information is interpreted, assimilated, and

presented by group members (Chen et al. 2024). Within this framework, resemiotization emerges as a dynamic process characterized by the continuous negotiation and reworking of the form and meaning of signs, driven by cultural and technological changes. In conclusion, within the process of resemiotization that characterizes forms of communication of Islam-oriented groups, literacy represents an essential component of socio-cultural (re)learning. This component is closely linked to another key element: adaptation.

8.3.2 *Adaptation*

Along with literacy, a key element of resemiotization involves renegotiating and contextualizing preexisting meanings, assigning new functions or significances to signs based on new contexts. This process can be seen as adaptation, which involves changes or adjustments aimed at improving compatibility or effectiveness in new contexts or under new conditions (Dusi 2015). Such adaptation occurs within specific cultural and social contexts, where shifts in meaning are influenced by prevailing social norms and cultural practices. Similarly, the skills my interlocutors have developed through interactions in hybrid spaces align with this adaptive strategy. The data collected on the use of emojis, hashtags, photos, and live videos reveal a series of adaptation strategies addressing diverse needs. For the sake of clarity and better comprehension, I have categorized these strategies into the following categories: reappropriation, impact, and participation.

I define reappropriation as assigning new contextual meanings to existing symbols, thereby transforming their use and interpretation within a culture, a community, or a communicative context. This adaptive strategy is evident in OREMA's use of emojis, where they are creatively combined to convey new meanings, turning simple images into tools of symbolic communication. For example, the *rub' al-hizb*, a symbol closely tied to Islamic religious tradition, is readapted and reappropriated into other symbols, such as snowflake and spider web emojis, which are graphically and symbolically distinct from the original. This reappropriation process involves both the symbol, which shifts from a calligraphic sign to an aesthetic symbol, and its meaning, which no longer serves to mark a pause in Quranic recitation but to express a sense of belonging within the specific context of Moroccan Islamist student unions.

The adaptation of the *rub' al-hizb* exemplifies how religious symbols can be reappropriated, distancing them from their original context and assigning them new aesthetic values. This is evident in the use of hashtags on the ulema's Facebook page. Originally technical tools for organizing content, hashtags are transformed into expressive devices capable of

conveying religious and cultural meanings. As confirmed by interviews with interlocutors, the systematic use of the religious formula “Bismillah” transcribed as hashtag in the Ulema’s posts illustrates an effort to reproduce the sacred context of the mosque in an offline setting through written formula usually pronounced orally within the walls of the mosque. This reappropriation also facilitates symbolic continuity between offline and online contexts.

The communication strategies used by Islam-oriented groups reveal forms of resemiotization centered on what I define as “impact”, the influence that a message, image, or symbol exerts on the emotions and cultural understanding of an individual or community. The mosque photos posted on the ulema’s Facebook page exemplify this approach: they do not merely capture the image of a place, but also its socio-cultural and religious significance (Fabietti 2014). The photos of seminars and prayers within the mosque halls do more than just depict architecture or gatherings of people; they evoke feelings in the viewer related to spirituality, culture, and the history of a people. This effect, described by semiologist Roland Barthes as “punctum”, refers to the element in a photograph that strikes the viewer, provoking an emotional response (Barthes 1980, 42). The decision to publish these mosque photos on the ulema’s Facebook page, as revealed in interviews, stems from a desire to present images imbued with meanings and connotations that deeply resonate with the viewer’s perception and emotional experience.

As Tariq stated, the photos are “windows” because, through the lens of photography, these places become accessible. The photos establish a connection with the viewer’s memory of an experience in that place or a similar one, creating a sense of continuity when they view the images. This is why the Bismillah hashtags are perceived, as noted in the interviews, almost as ritual formulas that grant access to the visualized space of the photographic image. This process generates a continuity between online and offline environments, enabling those who view the photos to relive past experiences and maintain a connection with the represented place, thereby integrating personal experience into the online space of the Facebook page. I define this dynamic as a “present absence”, reinterpreting Barthes’ concept of *presence-absence* (Barthes 1980, 148), to describe the phenomenon where the object depicted in the photograph, although physically absent, becomes present in the observer’s memory through the emotional resonance that the image evokes.

Photo posting highlights strategies aims at maximizing participation, another key component of the adaptation processes involved in the resemiotization of interaction within Islam-oriented groups. The photographs of the mosque are designed to evoke an emotional connection with the viewer by tapping into their personal experiences of the space, thereby

encouraging users to maximizing participation both online, through comments and likes, and offline, by attending the prayers and seminars. This strategy is also evident in the extensive use of emojis in Al-Amal's digital communication. Emojis enhance the visual transmission of information, making them particularly effective in contexts where speed and conciseness in conveying messages are crucial to capture the users' attention. By leveraging this form of visual and emotional communication, Meryam can capture the attention of a broader audience, including non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, thereby expanding the target demographic and increasing participation.

Indeed, as Meryam states, the crowdfunding target audience also includes the Moroccan diaspora, particularly those living in Europe, Canada, and the US. For the diaspora, visual cues—such as emojis of the Moroccan flag—serve as powerful emotional connectors. These elements evoke a sense of nostalgia and cultural pride, reinforcing ties to the homeland even for those who may no longer read or write Arabic fluently. This is especially true for second- and third-generation Moroccans born abroad, who may not speak Arabic but have internalized key cultural symbols and narratives through family and community networks. As visual markers, emoji serve as cultural anchors, connecting this audience to their heritage and fostering a sense of belonging that transcends linguistic barriers. This strategy underscores the power of nonverbal communication within the online spheres. By tapping into emotional connections, NGOs can effectively mobilize the diaspora as a key audience, fostering engagement while also attracting potential funders and advocates for their causes.

On the other hand, the use of emoji underscores how Islam-oriented groups may conform to digital communication norms, which tend to homogenize and flatten socio-cultural diversity in interactions, in order to maximize their online presence and increase user engagement. An example of this adaptation is evident in online *ḥalaqāt*, where the oratory techniques and body language that are central to offline *ḥalaqāt* become secondary to the increased emphasis on live video comments. This shift in focus occurs because the group recognizes that a higher number of views, likes, and comments increases the likelihood that their videos will appear more frequently in the feeds of users following OREMA's Facebook page. This enhanced visibility encourages more frequent interaction with the page, creating a feedback loop of participation and engagement. As a result, the speakers' focus shifts toward managing and responding to live comments, acknowledging the importance of real-time audience interaction to sustain and grow their online presence. The resemiotization of the *ḥalqa* thus becomes a strategic tool for maximizing participation and therefore the group's visibility.

Criteria related to reappropriation, participation, and impact drive the resemiotization of interactions within hybrid environments, highlighting a range of communication strategies that reflect the distinct practices of each group. In this context, resemiotization is not just about these groups adapting to digital platforms; it also involves a process in which digital media are actively shaped by the socio-cultural practices of these groups. As semiologist Nicola Dusi states, “resemiotization is a complex “form of action”, not a simple transcodification but a transcultural and dynamic event caught between the requirement to remain faithful to the source and the need to transform it into a result that is understood and accepted in the target system” (Dusi 2015, 183). In this sense, the adaptive criteria observed in the resemiotization of online and offline interactions within Islam-oriented groups can be understood as “tactics”, following the definition provided by historian Michel de Certeau (de Certeau 1980, 57). Theorized as adaptive strategies, tactics are the means by which individuals and groups navigate spaces shaped by a “strategy”, which refers to the mechanisms through which those in power construct and control spaces to reinforce their dominance. In contrast, tactics exploit fleeting opportunities, transforming the constraints imposed by strategies into spaces for expression and action (Ibid. 1980). The forms of re-signification discussed in the preceding pages illustrate how social actors utilize these opportunities to maneuver within the boundaries of imposed structures, directly contributing to the construction of their subjectivity. Through such practices, Islam-oriented individuals not only negotiate their roles within the group but also actively shape their self-identity in relation to the social and symbolic dynamics of their context, as further explored in chapter 9.

ON RECONFIGURATION



Fig. 22 OREMA's feminine ḥalqa at the Faculty of Humanities, Abdelmalek Essaâdi University of Tétouan, June 2022. Photo by Eleonora Landucci. © Eleonora Landucci.

In the previous chapters, I examined the discourses and practices of actors within Islam-oriented groups in specific spatial and communicative contexts. In this section, I will focus on analyzing how the resemiotization of interaction within hybrid spaces contributes to the formation of distinctive subjectivities. In other words, after demonstrating how social actors influence the contexts in which they operate, I now aim to explore whether and how these very contexts, in turn, reshape the subjectivities of the social actors themselves. By “reconfiguration”, I refer to a process of transformation or alteration in how subjectivity—namely, self-perception or the experience of the self—is conceived and lived, in response to various external factors such as technological, social, or cultural changes. Indeed, the term “reconfiguration” highlights the substantial modification of an original configuration with the purpose of adapting to new needs, circumstances, or objectives. Thus, the reconfiguration of

subjectivity can be understood as a dynamic process through which individuals navigate and integrate their complex and intersecting identities into the fabric of their everyday lives.

To fully grasp this reconfiguration, I will present and analyze data collected through the biographical method, commonly referred to as the “life story” approach. This methodological tool, central to anthropology, is a qualitative technique that emphasizes the narration of individual experiences to reveal how people interpret and ascribe meaning to the events that shape their lives (Crapanzano 1980). Life stories offer a unique analytical lens, bridging personal narratives with broader social and cultural frameworks, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of how individuals negotiate their identities and social roles (Amit 2000). Additionally, this method enables the exploration of how individuals respond to and adapt within evolving social structures and historical transformations, providing a rich and multifaceted perspective on their subjectivities (Bessin 2009).

I argue that this method is particularly effective in understanding and analyzing how factors such as race, gender, social class, ability, and religion intersect and overlap, shaping individuals’ experiences in complex and interconnected ways. This approach draws on the theoretical and methodological framework of “intersectionality”, systematized by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and already posited by the Black feminist movement in the United States during the 1980s (hooks 1981; Crenshaw 1991). According to these scholars, experiences of oppression, discrimination, and inequality cannot be understood merely by adding up different forms of oppression; rather, they must be analyzed through their intricate and dynamic interactions (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality thus provides an analytical framework for understanding how subjectivity is constantly reconfigured in response to the multiple and interrelated forms of oppression and privilege that individuals face. In this chapter, I will apply this analytical framework to examine the individual experiences associated with participation in the three Islam-oriented groups examined in this thesis.

The choice to explore reconfiguration through the biographical method and the intersectional analytical framework is grounded in a conception of the subject informed by Giddens’ sociological approach. Drawing on sociologist Anthony Giddens, while individuals are shaped by social structures, they also possess the ability to act upon and transform those structures. Giddens’ concept of “agency” refers to this ability to intervene in the world and to influence social structures, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual action and the constraints or opportunities provided by the social environment (Giddens 1984). However, this relationship between social structures and individuals does not produce consistent or coherent patterns; instead, it often leads to outcomes that are unique, contradictory, and

complex. Bourdieusian-driven sociological theories offer a more nuanced view on construction of subjectivity, defined by a multiplicity of socialization experiences that may conflict with one another. In this framework, the relationship between structure and agency is not strictly deterministic but leaves room for a variety of individual responses (Lahire 2005). This dynamic perspective helps us understand how individuals continuously negotiate their agencies within social contexts, actively shaping and reshaping social structures in the process.

Building on these theories, this chapter explores, through the biographical method and intersectional analysis, the complexity of subjectivity reconfiguration within Islam-oriented groups in hybrid contexts. The biographical method is particularly effective in revealing the contradictions and nuances that characterize the human condition, while also emphasizing the uniqueness of individual experiences. The data collected through this method, resulted from self-narratives and self-representations, are further enriched by participant observation and qualitative interviews. This approach has enabled me not only to grasp how individuals perceive themselves but also to analyze how these self-perceptions engage with the social and cultural practices within their context. Rather than seeking coherence in human behavior, the aim is to develop hypotheses that reflect the complexity and heterogeneity of individual experiences. This approach, allowed me to investigate the interplay between agency and sociocultural contexts, emphasizing the ongoing negotiation inherent in the construction of the self within Islam-oriented groups.

9.1 Following One's Path

In the following pages, I will recount the life stories that Meryam, Fatima, and Tariq shared with me during months of fieldwork. These narratives go beyond simple accounts of individual experiences; they reveal a complex tapestry of journeys in which Islam is not only embraced as a personal faith but also lived as a deeply rooted cultural, social, and political project within distinct local contexts (an NGO, a student union, a religious institution). The diversity of these trajectories is expressed through what I refer to as “signs of everyday life”: self-descriptions and self-representations, reflections on the present, past, and future, as well as places, objects, individual and collective choices, rituals, communication tools, and channels of dissemination. These signs of everyday life trace personal trajectories while also mapping broader social and cultural landscapes, illustrating how these individuals negotiate their identities within contexts that are simultaneously local and global.

9.1.1 *Meryam's Spark*

It is rare to see Meryam without her phone. She always wears it around her neck, thanks to a cord attached to its case. The accessory is indeed practical, letting her “avoid wasting time searching for the phone in my bag”. Meryam spends countless hours on her phone: “It is my job”, she says with a smile. But there’s more to it: “It is my mobile home”, she adds one afternoon at a café, after casually dismissing a video call from her mother. “I’ll call her back later, and we’ll talk for hours”, she continues with a calm expression in her face. Video calls to her mother and younger sister, who live in Fnideq, are a daily routine for Meryam. Living in Martil, in a house she shares with two other girls, these calls are her main way of staying close to her loved ones. Martil and Fnideq are approximately 35 kilometers apart, a distance Meryam mainly travels using shared taxis or the occasional bus with limited and often unreliable schedules, especially outside peak hours. These mobility challenges make the use of a mobile phone crucial, as it “extends”, in Meryam’s words, the time she and her mother can spend together. Thanks to her monthly phone plan that easily covers the hours of talking³⁴⁵, these conversations are more than just exchanges of words—they are a precious thread that keeps them connected, allowing them to feel close despite the physical distance.

For Meryam, wearing her phone around her neck is also a matter of style. The phone cord isn’t just a practical accessory, it is a signature part of her look. Her collection of cords varies in style, color, and materials, ranging from minimalist, monochrome designs to more elaborate ones embellished with beads or intricate patterns. Meryam carefully selects each cord, often changing them to match her outfit or reflect her mood of the day. She is very mindful of her appearance, which she describes as “modest”, but when we walk through the souk in Tétouan, she’s always on the lookout for “chic” items to enhance her look, like necklaces, bracelets, watches, or sunglasses. Meryam is also meticulous about her makeup and loves having her hair straightened and dyed with henna, dedicating time to her hairstyle every week, doing it herself. The young woman only wears the hijab during prayer times or when visiting her family.

Meryam’s phone is also her main tool for finding inspiration for her fashion choices. She spends a lot of time carefully following various Instagram pages dedicated to “modest fashion”, a movement that promotes dressing in a way that respects modesty—understood as

³⁴⁵ In Morocco, many mobile phone plans still offer prepaid options that can be recharged on a weekly or monthly basis, without requiring a contract. These plans tend to be more affordable, providing flexibility for users who prefer not to commit to long-term subscriptions.

body covering and shape concealing—without sacrificing style and elegance³⁴⁶. These platforms are an endless source of ideas, tips, and new trends for Meryam, who often shows me reels from these accounts, mostly run by women. Among these, she often shows me the account of Abir El Saghir, a Lebanese chef and fashion influencer who has taken social media by storm, with over 22 million followers on TikTok and 1 million on Instagram³⁴⁷. Meryam is captivated by Abir: “I adore her! She’s so elegant and always well put-together... she has a unique style! You know, she launched her own clothing brand... she’s an entrepreneur now, but she hasn’t abandoned her traditions!”.

When I ask what traditions mean to her, Meryam answers without hesitation: “Family”, then “religion” and “culture”. At 30, Meryam, who isn’t married and doesn’t have children, is a practicing Muslim. Besides her phone, Meryam always carries her personal copy of the Quran. It is a pocket-sized version, carefully kept in a dark blue leather case with a zip closure. The case is adorned with classic Arabic inscription “*al-qur‘an*” embroidered in golden calligraphy. The visible wear on the cover suggests how often Meryam uses the book, and she proudly claims to know many parts of the text by heart. Meryam describes herself as “believer”, in a context where, according to her, religion is often just a “formality”: “In Morocco, for some people, Islam is superficial... they say they are Muslims but then they drink, smoke, and have multiple women... there is no light that illuminate their soul”.

Meryam’s religiosity hasn’t always been a part of her life. This change came during her 20s, after the death of her father, who was 15 years older than her mother. She recounts her conflicted relationship with the father precisely over religious obligations: “I never wanted to go to Friday prayers with my family, and my father wasn’t happy... he was never happy with anything”, she says with a sad look, “he said I was a disgrace to the family, the eldest who didn’t wear the scarf when going out... sometimes he tried to force me, but I would run

³⁴⁶ Tied to religious precepts of body covering, but not only, this fashion movement began gaining popularity in the early 2000s but saw significant growth starting in 2010, largely due to the rise of social media and the emergence of influencers who made modest fashion more visible and accessible on a global scale. The ascent of “modest fashion” was further propelled by global brands and designers who began recognizing the importance of this market. Major fashion houses have launched collections that reflect the principles of modest fashion, helping to legitimize and further popularize the movement. Additionally, events like Modest Fashion Week, which takes place in various cities around the world, have provided even more visibility to this segment of the fashion industry.

³⁴⁷ A typical TikTok video by Abir El Saghir begins with her skillfully preparing a traditional Lebanese or international dish, each step executed with precision and confidence. The cinematography is meticulously crafted, featuring frequent close-ups, slow-motion shots, and seamless transitions that guide the viewer from the initial preparation of ingredients to the beautifully presented final product. The background music is vibrant and engaging, reflecting Abir’s preference for lip-syncing to popular songs rather than speaking directly, which adds a dynamic rhythm to the video. The presentation of the finished dish is always polished, with elegant garnishes and a satisfied expression from Abir, capturing the culmination of her culinary expertise.

away... or my mother or grandmother would step in... but it never ended well for us...". The eldest of five siblings from a family of small shopkeepers living in Fnideq, Meryam describes the family environment as "harsh" and her father as authoritarian and violent. Looking back on those years, she felt "lost" and "on the wrong path" and saw religion at that time as a "burden" or an "obligation".

When her father died, Meryam had completed her undergraduate studies in management at the University of Tétouan and was residing in Martil with her aunt's family. This period of her life was particularly difficult: away from her grieving family, Meryam found herself working remotely in a call center to support herself financially, unable to find a job aligned with her degree in management and business. It was in this context of solitude and challenge that Meryam decided to start attending the mosque in Martil. Participating in the mosque's religious activities gradually brought her back to religious practice. She especially associates this change with a significant moment during prayer when the imam recited a verse from sura *al-nūr*, associating Allah with light³⁴⁸. Meryam vividly recalls the imam talking about this sura, urging the faithful to embrace the light of Allah:

M—"In that moment", she says, "I felt that a spark ignite within me, as if I had finally found my way... *al-ṣirāṭ* we say in the religion, the right path that Allah guides every good Muslim to follow... I no longer wanted to run away like I did when I was a child... the mosque protected me... and the light too".

When recounting her life, Meryam often uses the metaphor of light to describe its pivotal moments. Meeting the NGO Al-Amal was one of these: "Doing good in the name of God and the Prophet, keeps the spark alive *in shā' allah*", she says with conviction. It was thanks to the mosque that Meryam learned about Al-Amal. During discussions with other young women after prayer, one of them, who already worked with the association, told her about this NGO that helps single women, victims of poverty or violence, and orphaned or destitute children, and was looking for volunteers. "I could understand those women... my family's story was similar... I was fortunate that the suffering stopped, but we [*Meryam, her mother, and her siblings*] suffered a lot too". Meryam starts as a volunteer at Bab Saïda, focusing mainly on

³⁴⁸ Here is the excerpt of the sura: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp; the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things" (24:35).

administrative tasks and accounting, thanks to her degree in management. This role allows her to connect with other women in the association, particularly Kenza, the daughter of the then-president Aisha.

Kenza, a young woman the same age as Meryam, comes from Tétouan's urban upper class. With a degree in law, she works at her father's law firm, determined to become an associate one day. She is deeply involved in the association, working closely with her mother to support her role of president. Kenza's friendship significantly impacted Meryam's life: Kenza is charismatic, dynamic, entrepreneurial, and, like Meryam, a fashion lover. It was Kenza who convinced her, in September 2019, to enroll in a master's program in Social Media Management at the University of Tétouan, which Meryam financed with the help of her mother and uncles, as well as her work at the call center. When Meryam reflects on her friendship with Kenza, she describes it with admiration, tempered by an awareness of their differences: "Kenza taught me many things! She can do everything with incredible ease and always seemed to have control over everything... She pushed me to improve every day, saying: 'If you dream it, you can achieve it; it just takes determination and faith'. But things always seemed to go better for her... things are easier for people like Kenza". When Meryam talks about Kenza's "easy life", she contrasts it with her own "hard life", where pursuing her goals often takes a back seat to family responsibilities and the need to support herself financially.

Meryam recalls how the tension between she and her friend began to escalate precisely when conflicts within Al-Amal's board intensified, driven by divergent strategic visions between President Aisha and then-Vice President Farida. With the onset of the pandemic, Al-Amal faced serious budget constraints that threatened the continuation of the association's projects. Farida proposed turning to crowdfunding, an innovative solution that was not well received by Aisha, who deemed it "risky" and potentially in conflict with the "community" principles on which the NGO was founded. However, the financial difficulties and pressure from Kenza, who, being constantly active on social media, had seen the effectiveness of this type of fundraising, eventually convinced Aisha. Finally, the president agreed to launch a crowdfunding campaign and entrusted Kenza with managing digital communication.

Despite initial enthusiasm, Kenza struggled to manage the campaign effectively. Realizing her difficulties, she turned to Meryam for help, who was in the midst of completing her master's degree in social media management. Although the campaign didn't reach the expected goals, Meryam stood out for her initiative and innovative ideas. This didn't go unnoticed, and in September 2021, when the position of secretary within the organization became available, Meryam was chosen for the role, in part due to her skills as a social media

manager. Meryam proudly recounts how the title of the position was officially changed to “Secretary and Social Media Manager”, acknowledging her abilities and contributions. This new role provided Meryam with significant opportunities for professional growth. For instance, she was able to participate in specialized training courses in social media campaigning, which were crucial to the success of the crowdfunding campaign launched in 2021. This time, the campaign not only met its funding goals but also significantly increased the NGO’s online presence.

When discussing her approach to managing Al-Amal’s social media image, Meryam often refers to the advice and wisdom of Farida, whom she sees as both a moral and professional mentor. “Farida always reminds us that we must be the first to set an example of morality and success”, Meryam explains. “If we don’t present ourselves as good Muslim women, good mothers, and good daughters, how can we expect the users of Al-Amal to do so?” Farida also emphasizes a principle that is central to Meryam’s work: “Islam must be practiced every day! The Holy Quran is a guide for our actions, words, and choices”. Meryam often quotes another of Farida’s teachings: “Anyone can claim to be a good Muslim, but to truly be one, you have to prove it through your actions”.

Meanwhile, tensions within the organization continued to escalate, particularly between the president and Vice President Farida. These tensions reflected a broader political crisis linked to the declining electoral support for the PJD, the party to which Aisha belonged in Tétouan, where she also served as vice president of the city council. The situation led to the party reducing its economic support for volunteer activities like those of Al-Amal, which had previously attracted potential voters, sympathizers, and activists. This situation culminated in a definitive split in the summer of 2022, with Farida being appointed president in September of that year. Subsequently, Aisha and her daughter Kenza, who had played prominent roles in the association, cut all ties with the NGO, marking the end of one leadership management and the beginning of a new phase for the organization.

9.1.2 “Only Youth Can Fight Corruption”

Fatima’s voice carries a mixture of sadness and anger when, the day after the legislative elections of September 2021, we speak on the phone to discuss the results. The 21-year-old biology student, in her third year, has campaigned for the PJD in her hometown of Tétouan alongside the “brothers and sisters” of the OREMA student group. Her frustration is not so much about the victory of businessman Aziz Akhannouch and his RNI party, which wins a 25% majority, but rather about the defeat of the party she votes for. Indeed, the most

surprising result of these elections is the collapse of the PJD, led by Saadeddine Othmani, prime minister from 2016 to 2021. The Islamist party, which had won 27% of the vote and 125 parliamentary seats in the previous election, plummets to 3%, losing most of its seats and retaining only 13 representatives. We exchange a few words on the phone, but one sentence she utters encapsulates all her disappointment and bitterness: “Now, only the youth can fight corruption (*mafsada*)”.

Anti-corruption has been a central theme and a powerful propaganda tool that allowed the PJD to rise to prominence on the Moroccan political scene and win the 2011 elections. This theme is used not only to highlight the entrenched issues within the country’s ruling class but also to position the PJD as the only party capable of tackling and eradicating this “endemic evil”. Another key theme promoted by the PJD is morality. The party presents morality as the most effective weapon not only in fighting political corruption but also in countering the “corruption of traditions”, which they argue has been imported from the West. This corruption of traditions, seen as a threat to Morocco’s cultural and religious identity, becomes a focal point of the PJD’s discourse. Initially directed at urban youth, particularly the unemployed and working-class, this message eventually resonates with the urban middle class as well, who feel alienated and in search of moral and political guidance. In this context, morality is not viewed merely as a personal issue but as a collective responsibility and a fundamental pillar for building society. When I ask Fatima what morality means to her, her response is clear: “the path of the authentic Islam (*al-ṣāḥih*)”.

The 2021 electoral result is particularly bitter for Fatima, who attributes the PJD’s defeat to the leadership’s betrayal of its founding principles. When I meet her in Tétouan in 2022, we once again discuss the election results with other OREMA activists. Everyone agrees that the decisive moment in the electoral loss is Othmani’s signing of the Abraham Accords. This treaty, signed on September 15, 2020, normalizes relations between Israel and several Arab countries, including Morocco³⁴⁹. “That is the beginning of the decline”, Yusuf, a 29-year-old senior activist of the union and member of the local Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR) branch, tells me, and many activists speak of the “betrayal of the brothers” when addressing the issue. Within OREMA, the disappointment is palpable, as the defense and self-

³⁴⁹ The normalization agreement between Israel and Morocco, facilitated by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, established formal diplomatic relations between the two nations in exchange for U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Since then, cooperation between Morocco and Israel has notably intensified, particularly in military and judicial sectors. See Georges Marat, “Maroc. La culture judéo-marocaine au service de la normalisation avec Israël”. *Orient XXI*, December 22, 2022. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/maroc-la-culture-judeo-marocaine-au-service-de-la-normalisation-avec-israel,6114>.

determination of Palestine is a particularly important issue for Islamist activists. Yusuf reflects a widespread sentiment by stating that “the defense of Palestine is the sixth pillar of Islam”. This perceived betrayal leads to an internal crisis within OREMA: several members distance themselves from Othmani’s PJD, instead expressing admiration for the return of Abdelilah Benkirane, prime minister from 2011 to 2016, who is seen as more faithful to the party’s original values.

This is the case for Fatima, who views the return of the leader as a comforting signal and an embodiment of the values that led her to join OREMA. Her journey into political activism begins in her adolescence. In 2016, at the age of fifteen, Fatima accompanies her older brother, then an activist in the MUR distributing leaflets and participating in the PJD’s electoral campaign in Tétouan that same year. The figure of her older brother is central to Fatima’s political engagement, and she frequently mentions his fundamental role in shaping her convictions and dedication. The youngest and only daughter of a family with four children, Fatima grows up in an environment that inspires her future choices. Her parents, both civil servants, have supported the PJD since the 1990s. However, it is her older brother whom Fatima looks to as a role model. Having joined the MUR during high school, by the age of 26, he has already assumed a prominent role in the leadership of the local branch, becoming a point of reference not only for the family but also for the community.

When the time comes to choose a university in 2018, Fatima decides to enroll in the biology faculty in Tétouan, following in the footsteps of her older brother, now a public administration official. Shortly after starting her first semester, she joins the OREMA student group. To explain the reasons for what she calls her “daily commitment to improving society”, preferring this term to my use of “activism”, Fatima echoes her brother’s words: “The only way to heal Morocco is through the reform of its values... voting will follow”. During her first year, Fatima goes through what she calls a “preparatory year” in which she and the new recruits, referred to as “sympathizers”, attend religious lessons as well as academic support sessions. For these activities, sympathizers are divided into male and female groups, each supervised by coordinators—senior activists. Fatima speaks of her group’s coordinator, Hasna, as a mentor, someone who becomes “like an older sister”, offering not only religious guidance but also academic support.

Throughout her first year, Fatima is actively involved in the group’s activities. The study of religious texts is interspersed with academic support, consisting of study groups and exam preparation sessions. Additionally, the young woman participates in internal debates on moral issues such as the role of family, relationships with parents and elders, and the importance of

community involvement. The group's activities are not limited to formal meetings but also include more informal events held in various neighborhoods of the city. These gatherings are designed to facilitate socialization among the women of the movement, strengthening community ties in a space free from the presence of men. Fatima explains how these moments allow them to "be together and get to know each other better as sisters, without the presence of men". For her, these gatherings represent the first social spaces outside the family environment where she can feel autonomous and free. "Sometimes my brothers drop me off at the event, sometimes not... but once we're there, we're only with sisters", she recalls, highlighting the importance of these spaces as places of personal growth and the building of a cohesive female community.

When discussing OREMA's activities, Fatima emphasizes with conviction that her involvement is not limited to mere political affiliation. It is about "feeling useful" and being committed to the "spiritual, economic, and social development of Moroccan society". This vision resonates with that of Hasna, Fatima's coordinator, who describes politics as a set of "ideas": "If ideas don't translate into concrete actions, then speeches and formal documents lose their meaning", she explains, justifying OREMA's choice not to have a formal charter. Hasna adds: "Our charter is the sayings of the Prophet and the revelation [*referring to the Quran*]". Nevertheless, Fatima is clear when discussing OREMA's missions. Without hesitation, she firmly states: "The promotion of Islamic values, knowledge, and dialogue, while firmly rejecting violence and extremism. Our goal is to train responsible and committed students who can contribute to the rebirth of Morocco through science and the spread of Islamic principles". Her words flow effortlessly, as if reciting a mantra she has deeply internalized.

When I meet Fatima again in Tétouan in 2022, the young woman is in her third year of university and has become a senior member of OREMA. Her role within the group is well-defined, with increasing responsibility and leadership. During the last university term, the group is busy preparing for the 12th internal forum, dedicated to "Communication and Effectiveness", and Fatima is directly involved in its organization. I meet her in a room at the women's dormitory of the university campus, where she is discussing, alongside two other "sisters", the division of tasks for the forum. In addition to managing the group's social media accounts, Fatima, along with two companions, will be responsible for the online streaming of the forum's activities. The meeting is interrupted when the women's phones ring: notifications from Islamic apps reminding them to break their fast and pray the salat *al-maghrib*, marking the end of the fast and the start of the iftar—it is the month of Ramadan.

9.1.3 “All Roads Lead to Islam”

After carefully serving traditional Moroccan mint tea in the living room of his elegant home in Tétouan, located in the residential area of the Ensanche district, Tariq invites me to observe some photographs hanging on the walls. Among them, the images of King Mohammed VI’s visit during the inauguration of the M’diq mosque stand out, which can also be found in his office at the council of the ulema. However, what captures my attention the most is a certificate, framed in an ornate golden frame. Pointing to the document with pride, Tariq emphasizes, “This is one of the greatest honors for our family”. The certificate acknowledges Tariq’s family’s financial contribution to the construction of the majestic Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca. Below the certificate, a verse from Surah Hud (11:7), mentioning the creation of the world, is inscribed, indicating that Allah’s throne “was upon the water”, referencing the mosque’s location, partially built over water. Gazing at the certificate, Tariq passionately comments, “This represents the greatest message of solidarity and love from Moroccans for their country and their king”. He does not mention, however, that this contribution was mandatory for every Moroccan family³⁵⁰.

Tariq was born in Al Hoceima, in the northern Rif region, into a wealthy landowning Berber family. “It was my mother and grandmother who insisted that I study at the Faculty of Islamic Studies”, he recounts, “because they wanted me to follow in the footsteps of her brother, my uncle, who was a wise imam... and I obeyed”. After completing his studies in Tangier, he worked as a high school teacher and was later hired at the Faculty of Religious Foundations in Tétouan, where he taught Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). In Tétouan and Al Hoceima, he continued his training in madrasas, and with pride, he tells me, “I even took lessons in Fez, at the University of Al-Qarawiyyin”. After settling with his family in Tétouan, he joined the city’s council, and in few years later he was appointed president of the Ulema Council of M’diq-Fnideq.

As Tariq recounts his educational journey, he expresses deep pride in the quality of religious teaching in Morocco, which he describes as “rational and modern”, emphasizing that it is not “obscurantist like in Saudi Arabia”. However, when it came to choosing education for his children, he preferred to send them to European universities, stating that he “only wanted the best for them”. His eldest daughter, Jamila, attended a French lycée in Tangier, where Tariq’s sister lives, and later pursued preparatory classes that led her to a prestigious

³⁵⁰ For further details, see “La collecte pour la grande mosquée de Casablanca Racket d'Etat au Maroc”, *Le Monde*, December 22, 1988 [*sic.*], https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1988/12/22/la-collecte-pour-la-grande-mosquee-de-casablanca-racket-d-etat-au-maroc_4122935_1819218.html

engineering school in France. His son, on the other hand, attended the Spanish lycée in Tétouan and later went to Germany, where his wife's relatives hosted him, and he enrolled in a business school.

Tariq is a charismatic and eloquent man, and this fervor is also reflected in the meticulous way he presents himself. Whether he is wearing a suit and tie for lectures at the University of Tétouan or a traditional *jallāba*, of which he owns an extensive collection, during ceremonies related to the ulema and the mosque, every detail of his style, from his impeccably groomed beard to his hair—likely dyed and always neatly styled—testifies to the dedication and commitment he brings to the roles he occupies. Tariq tells me that this attention to detail never wavered, even during the lockdown, when, like other council members, he recorded lessons and sermons that were later uploaded to the council's YouTube channel. Proudly, he shows me his studio, where he filmed the videos, explaining that during the recordings, he paid close attention to creating a “suitable” environment. For this reason, he had taken the Moroccan flag and the royal emblem flag from the ulema office and moved the photos of the mosque's inauguration by the king from the living room to the bookshelves behind his desk, so that he could have behind him “the important values of our country: the king and religion”, he says, listing them in that order.

Tariq is no stranger to being in front of a camera or microphone. As the president of a local ulema council, he is frequently invited to participate in various radio and television broadcasts, both local and national, such as Al-Sadissa and Radio Mohammed VI for the reading of the Holy Quran, both closely tied to the royal palace. “I remember that, before the pandemic, my appearances were broadcast on the radio and television, but also on social networks! My daughters would show me clips with short videos on Facebook [*reels*]... Then the pandemic arrived, and social media became a necessity even for our council! We opened a YouTube channel and created a WhatsApp group, but to promote these channels, we also set up a Facebook page, because that's where most information is exchanged... or at least that's what my daughters and younger colleagues told me! And they were right! During the pandemic, Facebook became our mosque and our majlis”, he says, smiling, before adding, “you're Italian, you know the saying ‘all roads lead to Rome’, I say, ‘all roads lead to Islam’”.

Although these videos did not achieve great success on the council's Facebook page, they nonetheless convinced Tariq of the importance of social media as “an opportunity to spread the message of the Quran and the Hadith” and to promote “my activities and initiatives as president, along with those of the council”. However, this was not merely a personal initiative. Tariq stresses that the decision was also made in alignment with “the directives of

His Majesty Mohammed VI to modernize the nation and preserve traditions”, and he explains that he received instructions from the media and communications team of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs through his “media officer”: “We are not experts in creating media content, but our lessons represent religious teachings and cannot be handled in an amateurish way. For this reason, we have an annual budget that allows us to hire social media professionals (cameramen and editors) to ensure that our content is up to the standards of the institution we represent”.

9.2 *Negotiating Agencies*

According to Judith Butler, the concept of “agency” involves a paradox: while the subject comes into existence only through the presence of norms, agency arises through the potential to transform those norms (Butler 2004b). Anthropologist Saba Mahmood further articulates this idea by arguing that such transformations of norms can be progressive, but they are not inherently so. In her seminal work on Islamic revival movements in Egypt (Mahmood 2005), Mahmood demonstrated how women’s religious practices of docility are not simply acts of passive conformity to patriarchal norms, but rather expressions of agency situated within the Islamic normative framework. This challenges the mainstream understanding of agency, which tends to equate it solely with resistance to social norms. Mahmood, by contrast, reveals that voluntary adherence to norms can itself be a meaningful form of self-construction. In the context of Islam-oriented groups object of my thesis, Mahmood’s interpretation of agency proves particularly relevant. Islam, as a comprehensive normative system, provides a structured framework through which individuals construct their identities. As such, agency in this context does not necessarily manifest in direct opposition to norms, but rather through their negotiation. In this subsection, I will draw on ethnographic data to explore the diverse forms of agency that emerge through strategies of emancipation, legitimation, and preservation. These strategies reveal the complexity of negotiating with existing norms, expanding our understanding of agency beyond simplistic dichotomies of resistance and submission.

9.2.1 *Empowering Women, Preserving the System*

Social and Political Normalization of Community Engagement

During discussions with Al-Amal’s members and volunteers, a distinct vocabulary emerges, reflecting the dominant discourse within the sphere of community engagement in

Morocco. Al-Amal consistently employs terms such as “participation”, “integration”, “development”, “responsibility”, “resilience”, and “empowerment”. These concepts promote a vision of development rooted in individual agency, emphasizing the ability of individuals to improve their circumstances through self-reliance and personal initiative. However, this vocabulary is not merely a choice of words; it represents a strategic alignment with national and international development policies, enabling Al-Amal to position itself as a key player in the associative landscape of the Tétouan region.

This language is adapted according to the various roles within the NGO—whether the board, paid staff, or volunteers. Terms like “perseverance”, “success”, and “achievement” are frequently used to describe both the personal trajectories of the members as well as the life goals that the NGO’s beneficiaries are encouraged to achieve. As a female-founded organization, the notion of “success” and “achievement” is framed not only as an individual pursuit but also as a collective endeavor. In this sense, the founding members of Al-Amal are considered successful not merely due to their personal accomplishments but because they have prioritized the community and collective participation over their own interests. These narratives of success often serve as a model for inspiring other women, reinforcing the idea that individual perseverance alone can reshape an entire community.

The paid staff, often responsible for the day-to-day management of the organization’s projects, deploy this vocabulary in practical terms, emphasizing “integration” and “responsibility” when engaging with the program’s beneficiaries. Working with children, abused women, and individuals facing poverty, they stress the importance of providing concrete tools to build a better future. For instance, occupational training courses and literacy programs are framed not only as a means of acquiring technical skills but also as opportunities for fostering greater independence and self-awareness. One of the NGO’s staff members, a mathematics teacher, expressed it as follows: “Al-Amal doesn’t just offer material aid: learning to read, write, calculate, cook, repair, or engage in sports... all of this helps women, young people, and children to break out of their shells and isolation, integrating them into society. We aim to help them become good mothers, and for the children to grow into responsible men, so they don’t fall into the trap of violence”.

The notion of transforming individuals to transform the social fabric is a classical concept in associative work, not only in Morocco but also globally. However, in this context, it takes on a particular nuance. While Al-Amal is committed to community transformation, this transformation is ultimately focused on individuals, not on a systemic overhaul of society. This perspective is clearly articulated by Farida, who states that Al-Amal aims to “change

individuals, not the system”. I discussed this with her during a visit to the Al-Amal Family Orientation Center, which works on domestic violence and abuse. When I asked her about the systemic impact of violence against women in Moroccan society, she responded that such violence is not a social phenomenon but rather an “anomaly” because Islam strongly condemns violence against women. According to her, it is this “anomaly” that must be eradicated from Moroccan society, which she views as fundamentally well-structured and deeply rooted in Islamic values.

This emphasis on individual responsibility, rather than structural social reform, not only reflects Al-Amal’s specific approach but also aligns with broader global trends in social development that have emerged in the wake of neoliberal reforms implemented in Morocco³⁵¹. Al-Amal’s activities mirror those of many other women’s groups operating in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and rural areas. Programs such as literacy initiatives, awareness campaigns, and vocational training workshops are part of the dominant development model in Morocco, one based on micro-projects, volunteering, and income-generating activities (AGR). This model of individual dedication has become a cornerstone of development management in Morocco, emphasizing personal contributions over broader structural reforms³⁵². Based on the premise that social change can be driven by individual efforts rather than systemic interventions, it reflects a vision of self-entrepreneurship in the realms of development and social inclusion (Bono 2010b). However, this approach conceal the absence of long-term, structured government policies capable of addressing systemic inequalities and adapting to the diverse social contexts across the country.

In this regard, Al-Amal seamlessly aligns with the neoliberal policies promoted both nationally and internationally. This alignment not only legitimizes the organization’s work within the Moroccan socio-economic framework but also enables it to access funding and technical support from major global development actors, including United Nations agencies and international NGOs (Hibou and Bono 2016). Al-Amal’s ability to conform to the language

³⁵¹ I refer to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program (PAS) in Morocco, which took place in the 1980s under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. This program aimed to stabilize the country’s economy through neoliberal reforms, including the reduction of public spending and market liberalization. However, it led to significant cuts in social services and a rise in inequality (Catusse 2011)

³⁵² These behaviors reflect a broader trend identified in various studies, showing how the ideological and charitable commitment that traditionally underpinned volunteerism has been replaced by a professionalization of skills focused on international solidarity, shaped by a managerial model. This shift is closely tied to the approach adopted by many Global North institutions in their work with the Global South, signaling a significant transformation, both ideological and practical, in the forms of moral solidarity (Collovald 2002; Lechien 2002).

and priorities of the dominant discourse governing Morocco's social development economy is not merely passive compliance but can be interpreted as a deliberate strategy for navigating the complexities of the global development system (Bono 2010a). This strategic conformity, while proactive, is largely driven by the rules imposed for accessing development program funding and meeting the expectations of local actors representing state institutions (Bayat 2017; 2000). One notable example is the role of local INDH committees, which are instrumental in defining local needs and pre-selecting projects for funding. Consequently, any actor seeking project funding must align with the priorities and definitions established by these local committees (Bono 2010a).

Farida clearly expresses this vision during a diploma ceremony for a pastry-making course organized by Al-Amal: "the NGO's goal is to create a more resilient economic and social fabric by promoting productivity and self-sufficiency through initiatives that encourage entrepreneurial spirit and active community participation". Terms such as "resilience", "self-sufficiency", and "entrepreneurial spirit", underscore an economic development model that prioritizes private initiative and adaptation to market logics as the primary pathways out of poverty. This vocabulary is not just a terminological choice but also serves as a tool of legitimization within a governance model that effectively delegates welfare responsibilities to private entities and NGOs, thereby reducing the state's direct role.

The language employed by Al-Amal thus reflects the power dynamics and contradictions inherent in the associative landscape of many countries in the Global South, where civil society initiatives are heavily dependent on neoliberal, globalized development models. These models often overlook collective needs and local cultural specificities³⁵³. This dynamic is evident in the notion of "empowerment", a central concept in the current discourse of international donors and most development programs, in Morocco as elsewhere. However, empowerment framed in this way tends to reduce social change to an individual process, defusing the potential for collective transformation and often ignoring the structural roots of inequality. Within the context of NGOs and women's associations, while they promote empowerment, they risk becoming vehicles for a neoliberal agenda that prioritizes women's integration into global markets over genuine emancipation that considers local dynamics and collective struggles. As a result, organizations like Al-Amal find themselves navigating the tension between

³⁵³ Anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan suggests examining public development policies in the Global South through the lens of anthropology. In his work, he deeply reflects on the contradictions and challenges that arise when global development models are implemented in local contexts. He highlights how these dynamics can create tensions and adaptations between international agendas and local socio-cultural realities (Olivier de Sardan 1995).

international pressures to adopt such paradigms and the need to respond to the real social dynamics of the communities they serve.

"Virtuous Femininity" as a Civic and Entrepreneurial Model

The model described, centered on individual initiative and empowerment, goes beyond merely transmitting skills. The promotion of activities by the NGO is often accompanied by the transmission of religious values and principles that transcend simple practical assistance. A notable example of this integration between ethical motivations and concrete practices is represented by the courses for women on reading and learning the Quran organized by Al-Amal. Farida summarizes the goals guiding these courses as follows:

"Learning and reading the Quran is the duty of every Muslim. Through these training sessions, Al-Amal is committed to providing women with not only the knowledge and tools to navigate life successfully but also guiding them towards a closer relationship with God. Women are the pillar of Moroccan families and hold a precious role in society... Many of the women who come to Al-Amal feel devalued and lack resources. Our goal is to help these women reclaim their central role, improving their lives not only on a material level but also through personal growth and the rediscovery of religious values that can strengthen their dignity and their role within the community".

This statement underscores how the activities proposed by the NGO are not merely designed to provide technical and educational skills but are also deeply invested in cultivating a subjectivity infused with religious and moral values. Al-Amal's goal extends beyond improving the material conditions of its beneficiaries; it strives to foster a form of empowerment that integrates both spiritual and moral dimensions, emphasizing the holistic development of the individual. However, these types of courses are not unique to Al-Amal. They fit within a broader strategy embraced by various women's associations across Morocco, operating in both disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and rural areas. These programs benefit from sustained financial support and are actively promoted through national policies and government initiatives, aimed at integrating literacy, religious education, and moral and civic training. By embedding these courses within wider state-sponsored frameworks, they become part of a concerted effort to align personal development with broader societal goals, promoting not only education but a deeper connection to religious and civic identity.

An emblematic example of this structure is the National Agency for the Fight Against Illiteracy (ANLCA), a government body established in 2013 that fosters close collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and civil society organizations to reduce illiteracy in the country. The ANLCA focuses particularly on women and rural populations, where illiteracy is most prevalent. Beyond distributing funding, the ANLCA also provides technical and training support to the participating associations. However, this support is conditional upon adherence to training programs that must align with the directives set forth by the primary funders, which in this case are the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

The government's monitoring of literacy programs does not contradict the broader social and political strategy of normalizing "community engagement" as a model for social development. On the contrary, by delegating literacy initiatives to organizations outside the national education system, the state effectively shifts responsibility for social welfare away from itself, while retaining strict oversight to ensure that these programs align with national guidelines. This maintains control over the content of the programs, limiting the autonomy of local organizations. Furthermore, this allows the state to exercise influence over religious education and, crucially, to promote a specific moral ethos—what I refer to as "virtuous femininity". Using Weber's concept of "ethos", which explores how belief systems shape economic and social structures³⁵⁴, the notion of "virtuous femininity" plays a key role in guiding the behavior and decisions of individuals within the NGO.

Al-Amal's members emphasize "moral education", "respect for tradition (*taqlīdiyya*)", and "behavior consistent with Islamic values", particularly in areas like motherhood and family life, where virtuous femininity is associated with family stability and moral responsibility. Following these values not only reflects devotion but also leads to tangible, positive outcomes in social life. Marriage, for instance, is seen not only as a sacred union but as a stabilizing force for women and their families. It is also perceived as a "social project for women", contributing to the "upholding of Moroccan society". In this framework, women are viewed as responsible for both family welfare and broader social cohesion. Therefore, marriage is not only a path to personal stability but also a way to attain recognized social status. Additionally, adherence to

³⁵⁴ German sociologist Max Weber introduced the concept of "ethos" in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1905. In this essay, Weber examines how religious beliefs, particularly Calvinist Protestant ethics, shaped economic mindsets and contributed to the development of modern capitalism. While this deterministic perspective may now seem outdated, the concept of "ethos" remains a valuable framework for analyzing how organizing principles are internalized and how they interact, generating harmony, conflict, or competition (Weber and Wells 2002).

religious principles within marriage provides a sense of security, as following the Quran and Hadith serves as a safeguard against issues such as infidelity and violence.

Virtuous femininity promoted by Al-Amal also provides stability to women who, by choice or necessity, find themselves outside the traditional marriage structure. The NGO offers targeted social and legal support to single mothers and women experiencing domestic violence. While the organization advocates for the “preservation of family integrity”, it recognizes certain irreconcilable circumstances, such as infidelity and, most notably, domestic violence, which justify divorce as a legitimate option. In this context, Al Amal’s work focuses on empowering these women by fostering their autonomy and dignity through programs centered on “education”, “professional growth”, and promoting the role of “responsible mothers”. The organization draws on the Islamic values of “solidarity” (*ta’awun*) and “compassion” (*rahma*), framing single women and victims of violence as “vulnerable”, “uninformed”, and “fragile” individuals in need of guidance and support. These narratives underscore the importance of assisting others, often portraying Al-Amal’s beneficiaries as passive recipients of care.

Conversely, Al-Amal advocates for a model of female virtue based on empowerment and leadership. Farida emphasizes that “women must reject being seen as inferior” and that “Al-Amal proves that Moroccan women can lead with the same authority as men”. This message is evident in the way Al-Amal members present themselves, particularly through the organization’s Facebook page. A notable example is the “Woman of the Month” campaign, which features a staff member each month, highlighting her reasons for joining the organization. Through this campaign, the NGO showcases the successes of its staff and volunteers, portraying them as strong, autonomous women who can integrate moral and religious values with entrepreneurship and modernity. In these posts, terms like “support”, “charity”, “morality”, and “duty” are interwoven with concepts such as “success”, “leadership”, “optimism”, and “excellence”. This model of virtuous femininity combines personal achievement and self-reliance, embodying an ideal of womanhood that is both devout and respectable, while also asserting individual strength. This self-promotion strategy aligns well with the promotional nature of social media. Digital culture, inherently focused on self-presentation and self-promotion, encourages these women to pursue an ideal of success grounded in individualism.

The ethos of “virtuous femininity” functions also as a crucial driver for volunteer engagement within the association. Interviews reveal that Al-Amal’s leadership, fully aware of the importance of maintaining volunteer motivation—given their pivotal role as the backbone

of the organization—strategically promotes models of “virtuous femininity” inspired by the wives of Muhammad, who serve as archetypes for what “virtuous femininity” entails in social contexts. As esteemed figures within Islamic tradition, the wife’s lives and roles exemplify a balance of piety, strength, and dedication, which makes them ideal models for the NGO. Each wife is associated with particular virtues that resonate with different aspects of volunteer work. For instance, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the Prophet’s first wife, is celebrated for her entrepreneurial spirit, loyalty, and financial support to Muhammad’s early mission. Her example serves as an inspiration for leadership, sacrifice, and resource mobilization within the organization.

Another example of how the ethos of virtuous femininity operates within Al-Amal can be seen in the Facebook posts celebrating the “Woman of the Month”. These posts often draw on an Islamic referential framework to emphasize the moral and spiritual significance to promote the entrepreneurial side of the NGO. For instance, a comment from a volunteer, quoted in the post, states: “Volunteering helps you realize your value in society, and even if you don’t receive a reward in this life, you will be rewarded in the next”. This integration of religious principles into the narrative reinforces the idea of volunteering as both a moral obligation and a path to spiritual fulfillment. At the same time, these posts underscore how the virtuous femininity model supports the NGO’s entrepreneurial dimension by enhancing the volunteers’ social visibility and status. Volunteering with an NGO that upholds this model allows women to position themselves strategically within a network of social and professional connections. As politest Irene Bono describes, it serves as a “calling card” that helps these women elevate their social standing and gain recognition (Bono 2010a, 10). This is particularly significant for women facing unemployment or precarious job conditions, as volunteering provides an avenue to engage with influential stakeholders. One volunteer articulates this opportunity, by noting, “I can well introduce myself to the important partners of Al-Amal [...] business owners, school directors... perhaps they will remember me when a job opens up”. In this way, volunteering can function as a potential bridge to the labor market, offering both social and professional advancement.

Volunteering emerges as a dual-purpose activity: it is not only an act of service in line with socially esteemed moral values but also a strategic tool for navigating the labor market. By fostering connections with potential employers and demonstrating valuable skills, volunteering offers a bridge to both social mobility and professional advancement. Al-Amal primarily attracts volunteers from the neighborhoods surrounding its centers, fostering a network of individuals who not only share a common sense of commitment but are also

connected through existing social ties. This sense of community is further strengthened by the NGO's structure, which provides a safe and welcoming space, particularly for mothers who volunteer. These mothers are encouraged to bring their children, giving them a chance to play and socialize in a protected and stimulating environment. This setup not only makes it easier for mothers to participate but also positions Al-Amal as a community hub, a place where family responsibilities can be balanced with social activism. In this way, the NGO functions not just as a service provider but also as a community support center, where volunteering becomes a vital resource for addressing the challenges of social isolation and economic precarity.

The promotion of the ethos of “virtuous femininity” within Al-Amal reinforces forms of agency grounded in morality as a means of empowerment and individual emancipation. This ethos not only shapes personal behavior but also plays a key role in constructing and sustaining a unique civic and entrepreneurial model that distinguishes Islamic women's associations in Morocco (Yafout 2017). Within these organizations, professional, civic, and religious education serves as means to instill a morality that upholds social and political stability, preventing the emergence of religious interpretations that might challenge central authority or disrupt public order. This model of “virtuous femininity” not only supports the maintenance of social order but also drives economic development in line with both national and international priorities, positioning women as key agents of progress. However, their empowerment is contingent on adopting entrepreneurial and self-sufficiency models that align with neoliberal economic agendas. In this framework, the responsibility for improving socio-economic conditions shifts from the state to the individual.

9.2.2 *Securing Legitimacy Through Compromise*

Strategies of Alignment and Differentiation

The activities of OREMA are largely similar to those of other student union groups, despite their differing ideological orientations. OREMA, which identifies as a “progressive Islamist” organization, undertakes initiatives resembling those of AWI, the student union wing of Yassine's movement, the MCA group affiliated with the Amazigh cultural movement, or the two union groups linked to socialist and communist movements in Morocco³⁵⁵. While these groups are rooted in distinct ideological frameworks, they share common objectives such as “defending student dignity and enhancing academic conditions” and promote similar types of

³⁵⁵ For a brief description of the AWI and ACM movements, see Part 2, 5.2.2 and 5.3.2. For a brief description of the student union factions present in Morocco, see Introduction, III.I.

activities. Whether it involves routine tasks like mediating between students and faculty, assisting with administrative processes, or organizing study groups, or more specific events like forums (*al-muntada*) for Islamist-oriented groups such as Al-Adl and OREMA, or “cultural days” (*ayām thaqāfiyyāt*) for the other groups, student unions’ approaches and activities are broadly aligned.

As previously noted, the affiliation of these groups with UNEM (National Union of Moroccan Students)—which historically challenged the monarchy—places them in a position of implicit tolerance by state institutions. Although informally tolerated, these groups are formally considered illegitimate. While they do not explicitly oppose the monarchy, they continue to challenge the existing political system, with the exception of OREMA. OREMA serves as the student union branch of the MUR, the ideological and activist wing of the PJD, to which it is directly linked. Furthermore, OREMA holds a monopoly on union activities within UNEM, both locally in Tétouan and at the national level, as it is the dominant force with the largest representation in the national executive committee. This places OREMA in an ambiguous position: on the one hand, it is officially deemed illegitimate by institutions due to its affiliation with UNEM; on the other hand, it is legitimized as the student union wing of the PJD, a party recognized and accepted by the monarchy.

This distinctive position, which sets OREMA apart from other groups, significantly shapes its behavior, prompting it to adopt strategies similar to those of the PJD in its dealings with the state. The PJD’s approach within the Moroccan political system relies on mediating between its claim to monopolize political Islam in the country and the need to operate within institutional frameworks, all while explicitly recognizing the political and religious authority of the monarchy. In a similar vein, OREMA aims to maintain its hegemony within UNEM by adhering to the directives of the political and activist organizations on which it depends, while also seeking legitimacy in the eyes of university institutions. This approach can be understood as a careful balance between alignment and differentiation. In order to effectively navigate the Moroccan political landscape, OREMA seeks to differentiate itself by serving as a representative voice for student concerns, while remaining closely aligned with the ideological principles and strategic directives of the MUR and the PJD, political forces that accept and operate within the established political system.

Compared to other groups, OREMA adopts a less confrontational approach towards the university administration. As Hasna, a senior member of the organization, explains: “Our goal is not to clash with the rector, but to elevate students both morally and academically”. This reflects OREMA’s broader vision, where political activism is aimed at improving the

student community, which is viewed as an integral part of Morocco's future society. As Hasna further notes, "OREMA is dedicated to ensuring that today's youth will drive tomorrow's renewal". The rhetoric of OREMA members is deeply infused with references to the moral, civic, and altruistic dimensions of political engagement, where membership is framed as a service to the collective. This mission fosters political consciousness among members, even though the term "politics" is rarely used. Instead, terms like "commitment", "responsibility", and "duty" are foregrounded, marking a clear distinction from other groups. For OREMA, political engagement is not an end but a means, alongside religious and educational activities, to guide society towards "a path of justice through Islamic principles", as expressed by a newly joined member. These concepts serve as key symbols of differentiation, setting OREMA activists apart from their peers and from members of other organizations.

The moral differentiation of OREMA's youth is closely tied to another defining feature of the group: activism as a form of "self-valorization" (Desrues and Kirhlani 2015). Unlike other student organizations, OREMA offers opportunities that go well beyond typical union activities, focusing on initiatives designed to develop professional skills and ease members' transition into the job market. A key example is the "Future Leaders Academy" (*mū'assasa atr al-ghad*) an annual event held in various cities across Morocco. According to the official Facebook page, "the academy brings together students and graduates from top business schools, as well as professionals and economic leaders, to discuss current issues in the economic sector"³⁵⁶. Membership in OREMA thus provides a unique chance to build professional networks that are often out of reach for non-affiliated youth. In this context, activism becomes a strategic resource, facilitating a smoother and more advantageous entry into the workforce.

In this context, OREMA serves a dual function: it acts as both a pathway for integrating young people into the workforce and as a strategic bridge for movements like the MUR and the PJD, which seek to establish deeper roots in society through the younger generation. These events allow the PJD to extend its influence by using youth as a conduit for entering economic and social spheres. Through such initiatives, OREMA positions itself as a tool for cultivating a future network of party activists while simultaneously consolidating the PJD's influence in universities and civil society. This dual role is made possible by OREMA's centralized and well-established structure, closely tied to the MUR. The relationship between them is sustained by a steady flow of directives, ideological support, and material resources from the center,

³⁵⁶ For further details, see the page of the academy, last accessed, November 10, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/fla.morocco>.

represented by local MUR branches, to the periphery, in the form of OREMA's university groups. This ensures strategic consistency at the national level³⁵⁷. This connection is evident in the fact that activities outside the university are often hosted at MUR facilities, and many of the speakers at internal forums are MUR representatives. This close relationship positions OREMA as a key factor in mobilizing youth around the ideological agenda of the MUR. As Yusuf, a senior OREMA member, explains, "The group's activities aim to raise awareness among students, preventing them from being influenced by ideologies that could harm both their careers and Moroccan society".

However, reducing OREMA to a mere youth recruitment arm for the PJD and MUR would be overly reductive. The group plays a more multifaceted role, positioning itself as an important actor within Moroccan student unionism. A key example is the end-of-year exam boycotts led by student unions protesting the poor state of Moroccan universities. These actions are typically organized by leftist groups and the MCA, while Al-Adl tends to stay out of such initiatives. OREMA, however, pursues a different strategy: instead of directly participating in the boycotts, it engages in negotiations with university administrators to broker compromises, either allowing the exams to proceed or opening additional sessions in September. This approach enables OREMA to maintain its credibility among students by supporting their demands while avoiding being viewed as the primary force behind the boycotts, thus preserving its favorable relationship with university authorities. In this way, all involved groups benefit: the leftist groups and the MCA gain visibility for their demands and strengthen their position in student activism³⁵⁸, while OREMA solidifies its role as a mediator between students and the administration, attracting new members in the process³⁵⁹.

Maintaining this mediating role has become increasingly critical for OREMA in the wake of the national and international political events involving the PJD in 2020 and 2021. The signing of the Abraham Accords by then-Prime Minister and PJD's general secretary Othmani, which normalized relations between Morocco and Israel, represented a significant turning point for a segment of the party's base, who viewed this move as a betrayal of the PJD's fundamental values. The agreements served not only as a diplomatic move for Morocco, but

³⁵⁷ This balance is absent in other student groups, which tend to operate with greater autonomy at the local level due to their lack of dependence on larger party structures—as seen within leftist groups—or their affiliation with movements outside of the government, such as the MCA, or even anti-establishment movements like Al-Adl.

³⁵⁸ Interviews with activists from these groups indicate that a primary motivation for their participation is less about ideological alignment and more about the prospect of securing a reliable pathway to achieving a diploma.

³⁵⁹ This practice has been observed not only at Tétouan but also at other Moroccan universities, including Meknès, Kenitra, Fez, and Rabat, underscoring its structural nature.

also as a strategic maneuver by the monarchy to further delegitimize the PJD. Mohammed VI deliberately chose the head of government, rather than the foreign minister, to sign the normalization agreement, a decision that struck at the core of the PJD's identity and public image. For the PJD—as for Islamist parties more broadly—opposition to normalization with Israel is a fundamental principle, making this action particularly damaging to its political standing. This crisis was further exacerbated by the PJD's electoral defeat in the 2021 legislative elections, which led to a substantial reduction in the party's parliamentary representation. These developments also affected OREMA, diminishing its dominance within the UNEM. Consequently, many local OREMA cells began to distance themselves from the party's positions, despite the apparent national alignment. This internal fracture also mirrors the MUR's shift away from the political trajectory pursued by the PJD.

A clear example of this local distancing is evident in OREMA's criticism of the 'Voix des Femmes' festival, an annual event in Tétouan sponsored by the king and previously organized under the PJD-led municipal administration. In an online statement, OREMA condemned the festival as contrary to Islamic values and Moroccan moral traditions, asserting that the resources allocated to the event could have been better spent addressing more pressing local economic issues. This criticism, which marks a departure from previous endorsements of the festival, underscores OREMA's strategy of local differentiation from its reference party. At the same time, OREMA's choice to express its disapproval through an online statement rather than attempting to obstruct the event reveals its effort to advocate for a vision of political Islam that avoids perceived unacceptable compromises while maintaining a functional relationship with existing institutions. Through this approach, OREMA aims to assert its ideological independence while operating within the parameters of the Moroccan political system.

This example of mediation highlights OREMA's strategy of balancing alignment with differentiation. On one hand, OREMA aims to maintain its leadership role within the UNEM; on the other, it seeks to avoid attracting excessive scrutiny or repression from state institutions. Although it originates from a legally recognized party, OREMA functions as a trade union entity and, as such, is subject to ongoing oversight. According to interviews, this oversight is enforced through several mechanisms: activities and public events must be reported to the local division of general affairs within the prefecture; at least one local authority representative must attend general union assemblies; and preliminary investigations are conducted on members elected to the national executive committee of the union. These surveillance

practices, corroborated by studies on youth activism and associative dynamics (Berriane 2013; Desrues and Kirhlani 2015) underscore the extensive control exerted by the state.

Such measures elucidate why OREMA adopts a strategy of conforming to prevailing norms, allowing it to function without drawing undue attention or facing repression. This approach is also tolerated by public authorities because OREMA assumes certain functions and responsibilities typically managed by the state. Services such as educational guidance, academic support throughout the year, and the promotion of training and extracurricular activities are areas where the state's provision is lacking, and OREMA effectively steps in to fill these gaps. Similar to the case of Al-Amal, the state benefits from the presence of organizations like OREMA, as it shifts responsibility away from its own role in ensuring the educational and social welfare of citizens. Conversely, institutional power permits OREMA to operate and disseminate the ideology of the MUR—a political actor that the monarchy has managed but not fully assimilated—as long as these activities do not directly challenge the regime's authority or deviate from the central power's strategic objectives”.

Generational and Gender-based *Entre-soi*

The alignment and distinction strategies employed by OREMA members—designed to balance adherence to the directives of the PJD and state institutions with the consolidation of their hegemony within student unionism—constitute a form of agency developed through compromise. This agency manifests within specific contexts that validate the activists' experiences, thereby enhancing both their autonomy and sense of belonging to the group. In this framework, individual and collective legitimation is achieved not through direct confrontation with institutions, but through the establishment of non-mixed social spaces, or *entre-soi*, based on gender and generation³⁶⁰. These spaces, described by activists as “protected” as Fatima has noted, facilitate the strengthening of internal cohesion while promoting the development of members' religious and social skills. The *entre-soi* thus serves as a fertile environment for cultivating leadership and representation, where internal power dynamics within the group are both reinforced and restructured.

³⁶⁰ In the sociology of social groups, *entre-soi* can encompass two contrasting dynamics: on one hand, it refers to the segregation or class-based communalism characteristic of dominant classes (Cousin and Naudet 2018). This phenomenon is exemplified in exclusive clubs that are based on differences in status, education, or social background, and extends to segregated white societies during apartheid. Conversely, within marginalized groups, such as racial or sexual minorities, *entre-soi* is regarded as a mechanism for self-emancipation: a protected and separate space from the dominant group that facilitates the processing of discrimination and the liberation from oppression (Gallot and Jacquemart 2023).

OREMA-organized activities are typically divided by gender, with even mixed events arranging separate spaces for men and women. This *non-mixité* is rooted not only in religious precepts but also in cultural norms that reflect the traditions of many Islamic societies and other monotheistic religions, where spatial division often occurs, particularly in ritual and worship settings. Given that Islamic texts do not prescribe uniform and explicit rules regarding gender segregation, the practice of separating spaces between men and women in many Islamic communities is largely derived from cultural customs and social norms rather than universal religious mandates. The focus here is not to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of these religious precepts, but rather to understand how these religious and cultural norms are internalized and enacted by individuals in their everyday lives.

In justifying and legitimizing gender *non-mixité*, OREMA activists frequently invoke the Islamic concept of “modesty” (*hayā*). In Islam, modesty encompasses more than just attire; it also involves respectful behavior, the regulation of social interactions, and the preservation of moral dignity. Interviews with OREMA activists reveal that many view modesty as a form of “protection”. For instance, Fatima notes that feeling 'protected' in the company of her “sisters” is not merely a consequence of modest dress but is intrinsically linked to the need to maintain a “pure” moral and spiritual life. Likewise, Hasna explains that being in a women-only environment enables her to cultivate a “self-awareness as a woman” that extends beyond simple group affiliation. She considers this self-awareness essential not only for achieving “spiritual purification” but also for securing “the rightful place of women in society”.

In Islamist student groups such as OREMA and Al-Adl, the practice of *non-mixité* is a defining characteristic. Unlike other student organizations, these groups uniquely maintain gender segregation during their activities, a practice observed both in daily operations and at annual events, including internal forums and *ḥalqa* (fig. 22). The gender-specific *entre-soi* established within OREMA’s female *ḥalqa* serves as a powerful learning tool. It not only facilitates the internalization of group codes but also promotes individualization through a conscious and contextualized analysis of these codes. Non-mixed female *ḥalqa* often address the status of women in Moroccan society. As noted during an online *ḥalqa*, “the issue of women’s rights must start from the family, as it is there that both public and private life converge”. OREMA activists position themselves as defenders of “women’s rights in Morocco”, but within an Islamic ideological framework, explicitly rejecting the label of “feminists”. This label is viewed as associated with an ideology perceived as “liberal”, “imperialist”, and “colonialist”.

During discussions, religious texts and legal and theological references are frequently cited to support the activists' arguments. However, these references are not passively accepted; instead, they are subject to thorough examination and contextual adaptation. Topics such as polygamy and abortion are actively debated, and various interpretations (*ijtihad*) are scrutinized, even when they align with the MUR's ideology. For instance, while the Mudawana has significantly restricted the permissibility of polygamy, Islamist parties like the PJD, despite accepting the new family code, maintain a subtly critical stance, arguing that polygamy might, in certain instances, prevent adultery. During a *halqa*, participants explored this issue, resulting in a divided perspective between the perceived benefits of the practice and its potential for abuse. This example demonstrates how OREMA activists reject ready-made ideological narratives in favor of fostering collective and contextual reflection.

This type of critical and in-depth discussion is not found in mixed *halaqāt*, partly due to the pronounced gender separation in debates: issues related to the "women's question" are exclusively addressed by female activists. Moreover, leadership roles in mixed debates are predominantly occupied by men, which reinforces the subordinate position of women within OREMA activism. As a result, female *halqa* become a key space where collective study and reflection enable participants to contextualize internalized social norms relative to their daily experiences. However, it would be misleading to view these spaces as sites of reversal or subversion of dominant norms. Rather, they represent a complex dynamic in which, through non-mixed *halqa*, participants develop intellectual and social skills that facilitate their structured and long-term integration into party-related political activism.

The *entre-soi* that emerges during OREMA activities is characterized by both gender and generational dimensions. Discussion spaces such as *halqa* are exclusively attended by students and peers of similar age, without the involvement of professors or younger individuals. Additionally, activities are frequently organized according to the academic year of the activists or supporters. The sole exception to this is the invited speakers, who are typically from previous generations. This generational segregation fosters an environment conducive to the development of specific skills and social dynamics, free from the influence of external authoritative figures. *Halaqāt* are not merely ideological discussion forums but serve as social arenas where activists can refine and develop their communicative and relational skills. Oratory skills, in particular, are highly emphasized, often regarded as more crucial than the content of the speech itself. Many participants view *halqa* as "testing grounds" or opportunities to "step out of the shadows", where oratory prowess is a key factor in gaining visibility and legitimacy within the group. This focus on rhetoric as a demonstration of charisma and determination

reshapes internal hierarchies: those who excel in these skills attain greater prestige and status, advancing within the group's hierarchy.

The generational *entre-soi* within *halqa* facilitates the re-examination and reformation of perspectives and discourses that challenge traditional norms inherited from previous generations. A significant example of this is the discussion of preachers, where participants, unencumbered by intergenerational constraints, are able to propose and critically reinterpret societal views. Being in generationally homogeneous settings supports this process, allowing participants to distance themselves from older models, not by dismantling them but by adapting and reworking them based on their own experiences. Additionally, *halqa* serve as environments where oratory skills, honed within a context of generational *non-mixité*, enhance both individual assertion and collective legitimacy. Effective public speaking attracts greater attention and influence, symbolically and physically expanding one's presence within the group, thereby bolstering the group's visibility and authority. This dynamic strengthens the group's cohesion and collective identity. Consequently, generational *entre-soi* in *halqa* is crucial for community building and collective empowerment, facilitating a more nuanced and critical development of discourses, encouraging leadership experimentation, and providing a secure space for the autonomous growth of both individual and collective affirmation.

OREMA's online communication introduces a restructuring of both gender and generational *entre-soi*, as the normative framework that structures the *halqa* is partially redefined in the digital space. While offline *halqa* maintains a clear demarcation between generations and genders, the digitization of activities through platforms like Facebook introduces a level of fluidity that complicates the maintenance of these strict boundaries. In the virtual environment, the potential audience is significantly broadened: a *halqa* intended for a female group or a specific generational cohort can be accessed by anyone, including men or individuals from different generations. This shift can disrupt the generational *entre-soi* by challenging the exclusivity of belonging based on age and shared experiences within the student context. Furthermore, participation or even mere observation by outsiders can constrain freedom of expression and critical discourse, as online interactions are subject to broader and less predictable forms of social control.

Interviews with activists highlight that the sense of "protection" is diminished on Facebook: "It's not the same to speak in front of a computer as it is to be with your sisters... even if other sisters are behind another screen, it's not the same community... But it's important to continue our missions". This breakdown of traditional barriers results in a reconfiguration not of the activities themselves, but of how participants are presented. To

ensure the continuity of the community, there is an emphasis on reinforcing the group's identity codes and distinguishing features. This process is facilitated by the structure of social media, which promotes the standardization of communication and the centralization of information. The increased centralization of online content by OREMA's national organization during and after the pandemic illustrates this trend: uniform posts and content across various local sections are a clear example.

Digital mediation of OREMA's activities introduces new opportunities for expression, presentation, and networking but also creates tensions related to the erosion of control over gendered and generational *entre-soi*. On one hand, activists can now engage with individuals outside the community, which influences how OREMA members perceive themselves and their roles in public discourse, affecting their agency. On the other hand, this shift diminishes the security and intimacy of the closed group, which are crucial for individual development within these spaces. The processes of collective legitimization and identity formation, traditionally rooted in direct interaction and oratory within offline *halqa*, are reorganized in the digital realm. While visibility and public recognition increase in the online context, this comes at the cost of the mutual support and safeguarding inherent in traditional non-mixed spaces.

9.2.3 Standardizing Faith to Stabilize Authority

Management and Technological Adaptation of Religious Worship

As I have mentioned³⁶¹, my personal background, which combines both Catholic and Protestant Christian heritage, facilitates numerous conversations between myself and the members of the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq during fieldwork. In these discussions, the two monotheisms are often compared, particularly in terms of their levels of tolerance and inclusivity. The conversations frequently center around themes of ethics and religious morality. Notably, the idea of an "Islam of the right middle" (*al-wasaṭiyya*) often emerge, which the ulema presents as a corrective response to distorted interpretations of Islamic thought, such as those from Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia or Shiism from Iran. During one of these conversations, Tariq articulates the primary mission of the ulema: "to defend the Islam *al-wasaṭiyya* by conveying a religious vision that "contrasts extremism and promotes balance (*mīzān*) and tolerance (*tasāmuh*)".

³⁶¹ For a reflection on the ethics of access to the field and the relationship with interlocutors, see chapter 2.

These principles are consistently emphasized by the ulema whenever discussions arise regarding the functioning of worship or the training processes for preachers. Indeed, they represent a structured management model for worship and religious institutions that has progressively gained a dominant position in Morocco, particularly since the 2000s and 2010s. Concepts such as Islam of the right middle, along with values of balance and tolerance, have become rhetorical pillars in institutional discourses aimed at legitimizing and promoting this management model, such as Mohammed VI's public speech following the Casablanca attacks³⁶² or 2015's allocution of Ahmed Toufiq, Minister of Islamic Affairs since 2002³⁶³. These discourses have since effectively translated into concrete guidelines designed to standardize religious practice, thereby limiting individual or local interpretations that may deviate from official orthodoxy. Fieldwork data revealed that these guidelines are structured around main components: a managerial and bureaucratic approach to worship, supported by technological adaptation, which optimizes the organization of religious practices and ensures uniform control at a national level.

The Islam *al-wasāṭiyya* manifests through a managerial and bureaucratic approach that encompasses various areas, including the training of Islamic scholars and preachers, the planning and management of worship facilities, the standardization of religious practices, and the preparation of personnel responsible for the maintenance and security of sacred sites. Tariq shows me a series of manuals housed in the council's library, primarily in Arabic but also in French and Spanish. "These manuals", he explains, "are utilized in all mosques across the country and establish detailed norms for the work of the *al-qayyimīn* (designating individuals responsible for worship)", which includes all personnel involved in the management and care of mosques. Tariq consistently refers to these manuals, especially in the courses dedicated to the training of imams and muezzins:

T—"The books not only contain religious teachings but also many practical lessons designed to adapt preachers to modern needs"

³⁶² I am referring to the throne speech delivered on Wednesday, July 30, 2003, in Tangier, which is accessible on the website of the National Documentation Center, <http://www.abhato.net.ma/maalama-textuelle/developpement-economique-et-social/developpement-social/discours-et-interviews-officiels/discours-et-interviews-de-s-m-le-roi-mohammed-vi/discours-du-trone-mercredi-30-juillet-2003-a-tanger>.

³⁶³ I am referring to Toufiq's allocution during the conference "Islam and the Promotion of Peace", held in Dakar on July 19, 2015, which is accessible on the website of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, <https://www.habous.gov.ma/fr/activit%C3%A9s-minist%C3%A9ri%C3%A8lles-3/2890-allocation-de-monsieur-ahmed-toufiq-ministre-des-habous-et-des-affaires-islamiques-a-l%E2%80%99ouverture-du-colloque-sur-le-th%C3%A8me-l%E2%80%99islam-et-la-promotion-de-la-paix.html>.

E—“What are the modern needs?”

T—“*[pauses to reflect]* For example, effective communication of ideas... such as peace, tolerance, and integration... The Kingdom of Morocco is at the forefront of this! It is one of the countries with the best training programs, and many foreigners come from all over the world to receive our religious teachings”.

Here, Tariq refers to the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates, and the Mohammed VI Foundation of African Ulema, both established in 2015 through royal decrees with the objective of training Moroccan and international religious leaders. These centers provide a comprehensive training program that integrates religious and human sciences, foreign languages, and communication techniques, aiming to convey a reliable and stable religious vision that counters extremism and cultivates leaders capable of functioning in transregional and multicultural contexts. Indeed, Moroccan diplomacy has invested in this strategy, presenting itself as a credible alternative in the field of religious education to counter the dominance of countries like Saudi Arabia³⁶⁴. Both traditional and digital media are frequently used to promote these training pathways. Tariq recounts his participation in a meeting with students from the Mohammed VI Institute, an event broadcasted on the national religious television channel Al-Sadissa. During this meeting, Tariq delivered a lecture aimed, as he emphasizes, at “spreading the values of tolerance and dialogue”.

The use of media to amplify the hegemonic discourse of institutions is an established practice³⁶⁵. However, with the advent of digital media, the methods through which this discourse is channeled and disseminated have undergone a transformation, taking on a more fragmented and adaptable form. An example of this evolution can be seen in the Facebook pages of the ulema councils and the YouTube channels of various institutional preachers, both ulema and imams, which are promoted not only by official institutional channels but also by local actors affiliated with these institutions. Another particularly significant case is the promotion of the roles of *murshidāt* and *‘ālimāt* on social media. These female religious guides,

³⁶⁴ Morocco has formalized numerous agreements with African countries to provide professional training in the religious sector for their citizens, particularly in Mali, Senegal, and Nigeria. This focus on West African nations, where Wahhabi-inspired terrorist movements are present and established religious institutions are lacking, underscores Morocco’s intention to establish itself as a leading model for religious governance on the continent (Bava, El Asri, and Hamdaoui 2021).

³⁶⁵ For further insight into Morocco’s public sphere, see chapter 6.

tasked with providing spiritual guidance, conducting literacy courses, and delivering sermons in mosques, have been presented as key elements in the reorganization of the religious field initiated in Morocco in 2003. Tariq explains that the ulema's Facebook page frequently features posts about these figures:

“These women are knowledgeable... models of mothers, sisters, daughters, and scholars of religion. His majesty the king, may Allah assist him, has embarked on a path of courageous and just reforms, demonstrating to everyone that religion can evolve without straying from its roots... His Majesty commanded this change [the introduction of women into the clergy], fully consistent with Islam, and the council's task has been to disseminate and consolidate this change. In our Facebook posts, we showcase an Islam that recognizes and values the role of women, their skills, and their contributions, all while deeply respecting the religious principles that guide us”.

As Tariq's words illustrate, the introduction of *murshidāt* and *'ālimāt* figures embodies the institutional strategy of balancing tradition and modernity. Since their formalization as religious figures in 2005, institutions have portrayed these roles as carrying a dual mission: promoting female literacy and social progress while simultaneously countering the influence of Islamist movements within local communities (Dirèche 2010). This is the message actively conveyed by the ulema's Facebook page, which thus serves as another medium to disseminate this narrative.

The feminization of religious personnel is therefore presented as a symbol of democratization and modernization, aimed at solidifying the image of a moderate and accessible state Islam. However, this apparent democratic and modernizing openness conceals evident limitations. Despite their increasing visibility, these figures are bound by significant restrictions: *murshidāt* cannot lead prayers for either men or women, and *'ālimāt* remain excluded from legal (*fiqh*) and theological (*ijtihād*) interpretation, prerogatives still reserved for men, as established by a fatwa from the Higher Council of the Ulema issued in May 2005 (Eddouada and Pepicelli 2010). This constraint underscores that the inclusion of women in the religious field does not necessarily equate to true equality or democratization of religious knowledge.

The centralization and bureaucratization of the religious field in Morocco primarily manifests through the establishment of a management model for worship, religious institutions, and their representatives, disseminated via both traditional and digital media. The adoption of technology to implement this management model is increasingly solidifying. On

the one hand, technology permeates every aspect of worship regulation: prayer times are standardized nationally, and the calls to prayer by the muezzin are pre-recorded and transmitted automatically, following a common practice in many Muslim-majority countries. On the other hand, this technological adaptation has generated new figures for mediation and the promotion of religious discourse, akin to “religious influencers” who, through the “soft power” of digital communication, reinforce and legitimize religious authority in Morocco. As will be demonstrated in the following pages, these new mediators contribute to shaping an image of worship that aligns with the values promoted by the state, amplifying the official religious discourse and embedding it in daily life through digital channels and social media platforms.

Preserving Religious Authority Online

In Morocco, the media serve as powerful tools for political and religious influence, offering the state spaces for mediation through which it maintains social control. Through regulations that balance freedom of expression and censorship, the government promotes the image of a “Moroccan Islam”, or “Islam *al-wasatiyya*” as moderate, modern, and opposed to religious extremism. However, the advent of social media has accelerated these dynamics: religious content spreads rapidly in less regulated spaces, giving rise to new online “religious influencers”, who attract large audiences, particularly among the youth (B. Zaid et al. 2022). Unlike traditional religious leaders, these influencers use accessible language and incorporate elements of entertainment, making religion more relatable and engaging for digital natives. The digital context also facilitates the emergence of influencers who intertwine religious messages with social and political issues, challenging the traditional authority of the ulema and fragmenting orthodox religious discourse. Consequently, the conventional concept of religious authority has been subjected to significant challenges and transformations (Bendahan and Akhiate 2020).

In this environment, new modes of religious and social participation arise, allowing for public discussions and sharing of diverse interpretations of Islam, which erodes the interpretive monopoly traditionally held by established religious authorities (B. Zaid et al. 2022). In Morocco, this phenomenon has intensified the tension between state control over religious discourse and the management of faith and religious beliefs. This tension is encapsulated in Abdelkader’s warning to his audience during a seminar entitled “The virtue of responding to Allah and his messenger” where he cautions against the proliferation of “digital fatwas” which are perceived as dangerous because “they threaten believers and fragment the *umma*”.

Nonetheless, as previously noted, the digital mediation of religious communication in Morocco is not subject to state censorship; instead, it is actively encouraged, provided it upholds traditional religious authority. In addition to being featured on national radio and television, the Maliki rite is promoted through digital platforms that are directly or indirectly associated with the monarchy, thereby reaching a broader audience and maintaining state influence in a context where heterodox voices often exploit the Internet to disseminate their messages. This explains the widespread presence of Tariq and other ulema in both mainstream and digital media.

As illustrated previously, Tariq is an exceptionally active religious disseminator across both traditional and digital media³⁶⁶. In addition to his participation in the YouTube channel of the ulema of M'diq, he shares that he is regularly invited to radio and television programs, as well as media platforms linked to Moroccan religious institutions. “It is my duty”, he tells me. The dissemination of religious teachings, known as *tablīgh*, is a crucial aspect of his role as an *'ālim*. The *tablīgh* follows an annual thematic plan established by the Supreme Council of the Ulema, which is communicated to all local sections. Each ulema is then tasked with adapting these themes into oral discourses that will be disseminated according to a predetermined schedule. According to Tariq, this mission of dissemination must be executed “with the means that most capture the eyes and ears of believers”, which he believes today are represented by digital media. He emphasizes the importance of this digital presence as a means to “bring brothers and sisters back to the mosque” after many distanced themselves during the COVID period.

Tariq shows me how *tablīgh* is promoted through the publication of posters illustrating the seminar programs organized by the council, detailing topics, dates, locations, and speakers for the scheduled lessons in designated mosques (fig. 23). These announcements on social media not only serve an informative function for the public but also represent, as Abdelkader points out, a tool to counter what he defines as “heresies” (*ẓandaqa*) or “infidelities” (*kufr*) in Islam—interpretations that, according to the *'ālim*, deviate from the principles of the “Islam of the right middle” (*al-wasāṭiyya*). According to interviews, the ulema aim to utilize social media to diffuse religious or political interpretations deemed distorted and potentially destabilizing, while promoting an orthodox view aligned with the religious and cultural values upheld by the state.

This strategy allows religious authorities to reaffirm and consolidate a hegemonic discourse that reflects and reinforces the national religious and political identity while

³⁶⁶ For Tariq's biography, see 9.1.3.

effectively disseminating their message in new media formats. As noted by Tariq, the Facebook page serves not only as a “window” but also as a “showcase” for the council³⁶⁷, becoming the primary source of administrative information related to their activities. The page functions as a publicly accessible repository for official documents regarding the accreditation processes for imams and muezzins, as well as communications on certification processes and training opportunities for those wishing to take on these roles. Khaoula confirms this function of the page, stating that one of her responsibilities is to respond to user comments on Facebook, providing requested clarifications regarding the program of activities and the council’s opening hours and prayer times at the mosque.



Fig. 23 Tabligh schedule titled “the virtue of responding to Allah and his messenger” (left) and official document stamped by the Supreme Council of the Ulama for qayyimīn’s applications (right). Both documents posted on the ulema’s Facebook page, June–July 2022. Screenshot by Eleonora Landucci. © Facebook non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license.

This digital communication strategy yields dual outcomes. On the one hand, the Facebook page serves as a unique informational point for accessing documents necessary for the council’s functioning, allowing those who, for logistical or mobility reasons, cannot physically go to the mosque to obtain information. The ulema’s lack of consideration for the potential exclusion of individuals lacking sufficient digital skills reflects an intentional choice to use social media as the primary channel for disseminating institutional information. This not only channels official communications into a single virtual space but also aims to attract

³⁶⁷ I refer to the interview with Tariq, an excerpt of which is provided in 8.2.2.

new candidates who are already accustomed to using these digital platforms, thus responding to the growing importance of technological competence in religious management.

On the other hand, social media provide the council with a platform to “present themselves” officially, ensuring transparency not only for the faithful or potential religious staff but primarily for state oversight bodies, such as delegates from the Supreme Council of the Ulema. This digital visibility allows the ulema to consolidate their position within their religious institution, demonstrating consistent adherence to the religious and political authority of Morocco while maintaining a balance between operational autonomy and institutional loyalty. In this sense, social media serve not merely as a tool for dissemination but also as a form of self-surveillance for the council, allowing them to monitor and publicly account for their religious activities, thereby consolidating their legitimacy both within and outside the state structure.

Digital communication has become a fundamental instrument of *soft power* for the ulema in Morocco, who utilize social platforms, mobile applications, and websites to disseminate a religious discourse that reflects and reinforces the guidelines of state authority. By creating easily accessible and shareable content—such as educational videos, sermons, and posts on relevant daily themes in the lives of believers—the ulema promote a vision of Islam aligned with the religious and political principles upheld by the state. This digital communication not only broadens the reach of official religious discourse, connecting with a wider and more diverse audience, but also shapes the behavior and opinions of believers, steering them toward a practice of religion compatible with the national agenda. The *soft power* of digital communication thus allows for the shaping of a collective religious identity through an ostensibly spontaneous and non-coercive process, contributing to the establishment of the cultural and political hegemony of official religious authority within the social fabric.

9.3 Reconfiguration of Subjectivity

Islam-oriented groups navigate social and spatial contexts characterized by specific modes of interaction and communication, which play a crucial role in shaping their activities. These interactional modes stem from the transformation and reinterpretation of discourses and practices, which are continuously adapted and redefined to respond to the hybrid nature of these contexts. This process is not only driven by the use of communication tools, such as smartphones and social media; it also reflects a variety of cultural, educational, social, and generational factors unique to the individuals involved. Interviews and participant observations

with various social actors reveal how they continually reinterpret their self-perception within these evolving contexts. This constant process of negotiating subjectivity—meaning how individuals perceive, experience, and construct their sense of self—actively shapes the spaces and contexts in which these social actors exist. In other words, there is a dynamic relationship in which individuals’ views and understanding of themselves influence the environment around them. At the same time, the environment and context also play a role in shaping and redefining how these individuals see themselves.

In this context, the term “reconfiguration” is particularly relevant for describing the construction of subjectivity among Islam-oriented groups, as it implies a recalibration to meet new needs, circumstances, or objectives. Moreover, much like the technological or computer-related notion of configuring a device, the term “reconfiguration” implies an ongoing process of adaptation according to the characteristics of the context (Brubaker 2001). This notion of reconfiguration is especially apt for capturing the dynamics I observed during fieldwork. The social actors do more than adapt to the new spatial, social, and cultural demands created by the constant transition between online and offline realms. The data reveals that these actors actively construct and negotiate their self-perceptions within the prevailing normative framework in Morocco—namely the model of Moroccan Islam. Thus, “reconfiguration” encapsulates both the adaptive strategies required by shifting contexts and the deeper, ongoing negotiation of self within a normative system.

Building on the field examples presented in this chapter, the following pages analyze how reconfiguration of subjectivity contributes to the formation of Islam-oriented agency in Morocco. The ways in which these social actors internalize and reinterpret social norms create a unique form of Islam-oriented agency, one that is specific to Morocco’s hybrid contexts. Analyzing these forms of agency reveals how the dominant religious and political discourse in Morocco is not simply adopted but is selectively assimilated, redefined, and reoriented by Islam-oriented groups to suit their specific contexts. Thus, their agency is not expressed through direct opposition to dominant norms but through a nuanced process of negotiation. Field observations reveal how social actors negotiate pathways to navigate, adapt, and even strengthen institutional discourse. Their agency, therefore, does not primarily manifest in resistance to dominant norms but rather through a process of negotiation. This negotiation takes shape through forms of emancipation, legitimation, and accommodation, through which Islam-oriented groups assert their agency and build their subjectivity within the Moroccan society.

9.3.1 *Emancipation, Legitimation, Accommodation*

Interviews and observations of the Islam-oriented groups examined in this chapter, show that these actors actively engage with the dominant normative framework in contemporary Moroccan society. Rather than passively conforming to this framework, social actors reinterpret it in ways that affirm their subjectivity and self-conception. Discourses on the “authentic Islam” and the “Islam of the right middle” are often used by social actors to legitimize their actions, beliefs, and life choices, presenting them as consistent with dominant values and norms. Since Islam serves as the primary normative framework in Morocco, these actors not only adapt to this discourse but also position themselves as examples of behavior that align with socially accepted standards. By promoting the idea of “doing good in the name of Islam”, they assert their belonging and legitimacy within the dominant normative framework of Moroccan Islam, which has served as a foundation for the nation-building process. In this context, Islam-oriented actors actively construct their sense of self while aligning their behaviors and beliefs with the prevailing societal expectations. This process reflects a negotiation between personal agency and the norms of the broader social and cultural framework.

To empirically assess this negotiation, an intersectional approach, as previously discussed, provides a valuable analytical lens to understand how individual agency operates within and reinforces normative discourses through layered experiences of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1991). Identity factors such as race, gender, social class, education, and origin intersect and overlap, shaping individuals’ experiences as well as their modes of interaction with the prevailing norms. These intersecting identity factors actively shape the strategies through which individuals relate and respond to dominant norms. Consequently, these strategies contribute to a continual process of negotiation and reinterpretation, reinforcing the discourse while allowing space for subjective redefinition.

Life stories collected during fieldwork reveal that many pathways within Islam-oriented groups reflect a process of individual emancipation that emerges from adherence to these communities. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young women like Meryam and Fatima, but it is also evident in older women such as Aisha and Farida. In environments such as Al-Amal and OREMA, where segregated spaces are common and decision-making occurs exclusively among women, gender plays a pivotal role in fostering autonomous spaces for socialization. Here, emancipation is achieved through a full and autonomous commitment to the group norms. This autonomous adherence does not signify a rejection of familial or social norms; on the contrary, it is characterized by a deliberate and practiced acceptance of

these norms. Furthermore, the activities conducted in these female-centered contexts provide Islam-oriented women with avenues for emancipation while still upholding gender norms. This dynamic illustrates how women can navigate and redefine their roles within the framework of Islamic values, demonstrating that agency manifest through a nuanced adaptation that honors both their religious commitments and their pursuit of personal autonomy. Within these spaces, young women can develop cohesive identities and enhance their sense of belonging.

This allows women to effectively navigate the complexities of social expectations, enabling them to assert their autonomy while remaining socially integrated. Being affiliated with organizations that are both socially recognized and morally valued—such as the NGO Al-Amal—empowers women to affirm their identities as independent individuals, thereby gaining respect and social recognition. Aisha’s experience illustrates this dynamic; through her involvement in the NGO, she has established a robust social network that has facilitated her political career within the PJD. However, it is crucial to emphasize how the intersection of gender and social class shapes women’s experiences of emancipation and affirmation within Islam-oriented groups. This interplay highlights that while some women, like Aisha, may leverage their middle-class status and social connections to assert their femininity as a virtuous model, others, particularly volunteers from Al-Amal or activists from OREMA, often rely on cultural and moral capital due to their limited economic resources. This distinction underscores the diverse pathways to empowerment and the varying strategies women employ based on their social contexts.

For example, Aisha and Farida, both hailing from an urbanized middle class and married to influential men within the social fabric of Tétouan, have leveraged their existing social capital to gain recognition and respect within their respective communities. In contrast, individuals like Hasna, who lack similar economic capital, must rely on alternative forms of capital, such as cultural or moral resources. Despite not having financial means, Hasna has successfully leveraged her skills, knowledge, and ethical values to gain legitimacy and recognition within OREMA. Her peers describe her as “an excellent scholar, a great speaker, and a pious guide” which has enabled her to emerge as one of the leaders within the union group. In this context, cultural and moral capital act as a tool of empowerment for women from economically disadvantaged contexts, illustrating how strategies for self-emancipation can vary significantly depending on the available resources. This distinction between the experiences of women from different social classes highlights the necessity of exploring the intersections between gender and social class to understand the diverse pathways to empowerment.

While forms of agency based on emancipation are facilitated by the social class of individuals within Islam-oriented groups, it is equally true that such agency requires legitimation, structured around adherence to a collective identity shared by group members. This means that, beyond an individual's economic, social, or gender status, they must demonstrate alignment with the group's moral and cultural values to gain full recognition. For example, Fatima's experience in OREMA illustrates how religious adherence and practice help her establish a subjectivity that aligns with the group's norms. By aligning her actions and identity with the values of the group, Fatima gains legitimacy and recognition from her peers. The legitimization that Islam-oriented groups members achieve, not only consolidate their roles within the community, but also grant them with greater credibility, which in turn facilitates engagement with broader network (El Haitami 2016; Pepicelli 2011). In the case of OREMA, for example, the recognition and legitimacy gained through group affiliation enable members to access larger institutional networks, such as the MUR and PJD. This access functions as a "social elevator" for participating individuals, opening pathways to upward mobility that extend beyond the group's immediate context.

Within this framework, gender-based privilege mechanisms reveal how legitimization processes often favor men. While deploying cultural and moral capital in line with the group's collective identity can provide individuals with opportunities for social mobility and recognition, the institutional structures in Moroccan society continue to confine women to roles with limited or indirect influence. For instance, a man like Tariq, who holds a position of religious leadership, can more easily gain recognition and access higher ranks, while his female peers do not have the same privileges and resources to build an equivalent path of social legitimacy. This disparity reflects a dynamic in which the cultural capital necessary to attain legitimacy is closely tied to gender, shaping the processes of social recognition based on normative, codified roles. Even within spaces that formally acknowledge female leadership, the path to legitimization remains conditioned by gender hierarchies.

These gender hierarchies are not openly contested by women as their recognition and respect facilitate access to legitimacy and social recognition. Within Islam-oriented contexts, adherence to religious and social norms is negotiated to fulfill both individual and collective needs without directly challenging the dominant value system. These spaces, often characterized by *non-mixité*, create social environments where women can cultivate an agency that reinforces their sense of belonging to a cohesive community. For example, during separate meetings dedicated to the spiritual growth of OREMA's "sisters", women not only find opportunities for learning but also platforms for exercising their agency. In these settings, they

can develop their individual identities within the community while remaining connected to religious principles, all without contradicting prevailing norms. Consequently, a space emerges for a form of agency based on accommodation, where agency is manifested as a form of personal autonomy that operates within the boundaries of traditional norms.

This accommodation-based agency is particularly evident in the roles of *murshidāt* and *‘ālimāt*. These women are recognized as professionals due to their training and respected for their status as public officials. Their roles are promoted within Moroccan society and supported by state institutions as a means of fostering social cohesion while respecting religious values. While the entry of *murshidāt* and *‘ālimāt* into the religious sphere represents a process of feminization of the clergy, they embody a model of female emancipation that reflects a continuity and reinforcement of the normative framework of “Moroccan Islam”. By positioning their participation in religious leadership as a continuation of cultural and religious practices rather than a departure from them, these women reinforce existing social structures. In this sense, these women manage to gain religious and social autonomy, finding their own roles within existing structures without directly challenging traditional norms and values. Consequently, *murshidāt* and *‘ālimāt* do not seek equality with their male counterparts. Instead, they represent an additional form of female religious authority that reinforces state-controlled dynamics of emancipation.

Postcolonial and feminist theories on female agency have shown how the Western insistence on a single “liberation” path for Muslim women reflects colonial prejudices and rhetoric, enforcing external cultural norms as universally valid (Mahmood 2005; Ali 2020; Abbas 2013; Sadiqi 2003; Spivak 1988). This form of emancipation becomes, in effect, a veiled oppression, where the West, under the guise of “saving” Muslim women, undermines their right to self-determination within their own cultural and religious frameworks (Abu-Lughod 1986; 1993). Rather, the Islam-oriented women I encountered in my research construct their subjectivity by cultivating virtues such as modesty, self-discipline, and devotion. These virtues are not seen as signs of submission; instead, they are viewed as tools for achieving moral legitimacy. The agency of Islam-oriented women is expressed through conscious, active internalization of norms—whether they are religious, social, or cultural. For these women, emancipation does not equate to rebelling against religious or male authority. Instead, it involves expressing will and self-determination through accommodation to the dominant normative framework. In this regard, emancipation is not a break with normative constraints; rather, it is the capacity to live in accordance with a moral and social goal. This can manifest as community engagement for members of Al-Amal, union activism for OREMA activists, or

religious education for *murshidāt* and *‘ālimāt*. Drawing on Mahmood’s theory, emancipation is not only a pathway to individual self-realization but also a means of building social bonds and “fostering a community” (Mahmood 2005, 62).

9.3.2 *Reconfiguring Subjectivity Within Islam-oriented Bubbles*

The expression of agency among Islam-oriented actors, based on dynamics of emancipation, legitimization, and accommodation, sheds light on how their subjectivity is reconfigured. Their movement within hybrid contexts and engagement in re-semiotized interactions shape the way these social actors perceive and present themselves. These reconfigured subjectivities are articulated online within what are known as “epistemic bubbles”. In these digital bubbles, ideas and opinions are amplified and reinforced by mechanisms of affinity and algorithmic selectivity, creating environments that foster ideological polarization and segmentation. Here, individuals may remain unaware of opposing viewpoints, though these perspectives are not actively excluded. Unlike “echo chambers”, where participants not only reinforce one another’s views but also actively exclude or ridicule divergent opinions, epistemic bubbles allow beliefs to consolidate without exposure to alternative perspectives (Nguyen 2020). Within epistemic bubbles, ideas are shaped primarily through limited access to diverse viewpoints rather than through active opposition. In my online observations, I did not witness any active exclusion of opposing views on the Facebook pages of Islam-oriented groups, this makes it inaccurate to describe these spaces as echo chambers. Therefore, in this thesis, I refer to these environments as epistemic bubbles, where beliefs are reinforced through passive algorithmic selectivity rather than through the active exclusion of differing opinions. However, studies indicate that social platforms can foster echo chambers through algorithms that predominantly present users with content aligned with their pre-existing opinions (Cinelli et al. 2021; Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray 2020).

Epistemic bubbles create a dual tension: on the one hand, they offer new opportunities for the expression of agency; on the other, their internal dynamics, marked by strong self-referentiality, influence participants’ worldview and contribute to structuring identities that reflect the group’s experiences and beliefs. This process strengthens internal homogeneity while reducing opportunities for engagement with external perspectives. Epistemic bubbles play a central role in reconfiguring the subjectivity of Islam-oriented actors by legitimizing specific forms of self-presentation that align with dominant discourses within these communities. As a result, the narratives and identity models promoted by Islam-oriented groups acquire a normative dimension, serving as reference points that define what is

considered acceptable or desirable within the group. These models, which are consistent with the prevailing normative framework in Moroccan society, influence broader social perceptions, making it challenging for alternative views or contestations of dominant norms to emerge. In this way, epistemic bubbles become effective tools for consolidating power and authority, supporting a social and cultural order that resists more pluralistic and diverse perspectives within Moroccan society. Based on field data, I have identified three models of “bubbles” that reflect the specific dynamics of the three groups examined.

Bubble of the “Moral Youth”

The practices observed on OREMA’s Facebook page reflect a structured narrative aimed at portraying youth as a symbol of moral integrity. This emphasis on the role of youth is well illustrated by a post on OREMA Casablanca’s Facebook page which is intended to promote 2019’s edition of the national forum “Future Leaders Academy”. The post, written exclusively in French, reads: “We firmly believe that Moroccan youth has a noble mission to accomplish: to renew the moral values of the younger generation, strengthening their role as pillars for the nation’s future and to provide their country with top-notch human resources, capable of meeting the challenges it must face in a complex world”. This positioning, that I conceptualized into the social category of “moral youth”, portrays young people as untouched by immorality or corruption—a portrayal that reinforces the group’s legitimacy. Through principles such as “dialogue” (*hiwār*), “renewal” (*tajdīd*), “responsibility” (*mas’uliyya*)—all framed within the broader mission of reform (*iṣlah*) and collective interest (*maṣlahā*) against corruption (*masfada*)—OREMA aim to distinguish themselves from the clientelism and manipulation they attribute to political parties and government-linked actors.

Notably rooted in Sharia, these principles allow OREMA to anchor its political vision in a framework of moral values. Indeed, the union’s mission is not confined to political change; it also represents a broader social project aimed at integrating Islamic values as a foundation for societal progress and stability. In this sense, OREMA fully embraces the principles of moral reform previously promoted by the PJD. As described by political scientist Juan A. Macías-Amoretti, by employing a “dialectical opposition” strategy (Macías-Amoretti 2015), the PJD has developed an ideology that reconciles Islamic values with participation in the monarchical system, deliberately avoiding any direct challenge to the sovereign’s legitimacy. Through this approach, the PJD positions itself not as a direct adversary of the system but as a “moral” actor advocating for reform from within. OREMA adopts this model of moral reform, tailoring it to its student base. Its rhetoric, focused on promoting moral integrity among

students and within university institutions, seeks to cultivate a generation of future leaders who, among other goals, are expected to improve, amid other things, the Moroccan political class.

This ideal of “moral youth” has also taken shape online, where it has fueled the construction of an epistemic bubble that amplifies and reinforces its ethos. Through social media interactions,—often standardized according to the parameters set by the national section—OREMA, cultivate a digital environment that promotes a shared vision of youth as morally exemplary. Within this bubble, members are constantly exposed to narratives that portray “moral youth” as a distinct and exemplary group, immune to the corrupting influences associated with traditional political structures but also with opposing union factions. This selective exposure to content and like-minded voices creates a closed loop where ideas are rarely challenged, reinforcing a collective identity that is both aspirational and exclusive. The online environment thus acts as a self-sustaining bubble, where specific values of morality are celebrated and validated, allowing the “moral youth” ethos to grow more cohesive within the group. This bubble is sustained by distinctive forms of communication, marked by the selective resemiotization of symbols significant to the group (e.g., the *rub‘ al-hizb*). As previously analyzed, this language, with its specific codes and shared visual grammar, is accessible only to those who have internalized the symbolic and cultural competence unique to this bubble³⁶⁸. In this way, the language strengthens the group’s internal cohesion while excluding those who lack this literacy, thereby further consolidating the model of the “moral youth”.

During the 2020-2021 period, this bubble functioned as a separate sphere, enabling OREMA activists to distance themselves from institutional political forces, including the PJD. Within the Moroccan socio-political climate of that time—shaped by the signing of the Abraham Accords and the PJD’s subsequent overwhelming defeat in legislative elections—the party came to be seen as a political force that had compromised its principles. For many young activists, the normalization of relations with Israel symbolized a “betrayal” of values they consider inviolable, particularly the unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. OREMA activists have advanced the “moral youth” model as a strategic tool, helping them to defend themselves against attacks from political opponents as well as internal criticism. This posture is amplified within the epistemic bubbles of digital media frequented by Islam-oriented youth. On the one hand, the bubble allows young activists to assert a distinctive ethos, setting themselves apart from a socio-political context their increasingly view as distant from their values. On the other hand, it also serves as a shield against external criticism.

³⁶⁸ For an analysis of the forms of resemiotization within OREMA, see 8.1.1 and 8.2.1.

In this way, the epistemic bubble not only serves as a mechanism of inclusion and mutual recognition among members but also establishes a protective boundary that shields this youth from the influence of the external system. This positioning fosters a narrative of youth as “uncorrupted” and “untouchable”, a status that allows them to remain insulated from the instrumentalization dynamics affecting other political actors. The epistemic bubble serves as a symbolic shield, providing the group with a moral and civic role that is difficult for external forces to directly challenge. While the “moral youth” model does not directly oppose Morocco’s power structure, it embodies a potential path for moral and spiritual reform—something the PJD is seen to have lost by “compromising” in the realm of government politics. This distinction enables the youth to adopt the position of “guardians of inviolable values”, a stance that not only legitimizes their actions but also symbolically protects them from direct state repression, as they present themselves more as a moral stronghold than as an overt political threat. Within this framework, OREMA activists reconfigure a subjectivity rooted in moral ideals and purposes, conferring legitimacy both internally, among group members, and externally, within society.

Bubble of the “Virtuous Femininity”

As previously discussed, the ways of being and acting observed within the NGO Al-Amal, particularly through interactions on its Facebook page, reveal and reinforce a model of “virtuous femininity” that embodies the principles of development governance currently dominant in Morocco³⁶⁹. This governance framework emphasizes individual autonomy and civic responsibility, promoting ideals of female empowerment that align with neoliberal dynamics, which prioritize self-entrepreneurship and economic self-sufficiency as primary pathways to personal and social achievement. The figure of “virtuous femininity” thus represents a woman who, while respecting religious and cultural norms, asserts herself with determination by embracing principles of self-entrepreneurship, efficiency, and productivity. In this framework, a woman’s ability to capitalize on her skills, generate income, and manage her own professional growth is seen as essential for achieving success and social recognition. The ideal of self-entrepreneurship within the virtuous femininity reflects a neoliberal conception that views individuals as self-managed enterprises, responsible for their success through continuous pursuit of efficiency and resource optimization. This model not only

³⁶⁹ For an analysis of the “virtuous femininity” model, its communication strategies, and the governance model for development in Morocco, see the Introduction, III.I, and Part 3, 8.2.1, 9.1.1, and 9.2.1.

elevates resilience and tenacity as symbols of virtue but transforms these qualities into economic imperatives that support and reinforce the capitalist system: within Al-Amal, the virtuous woman is one who, through her commitment and disciplined self-management, succeeds in reconciling traditional expectations with market values.

Meryam's life story highlights how her role models are strongly shaped by examples of virtuous femininity she encounters online, particularly from female influencers. These figures, through their online visibility, help to legitimize and make desirable an ideal of femininity that conforms to contemporary economic and social imperatives while also reinterpreting symbols and values rooted in what is portrayed as a unified Arab-Muslim culture (Pourmehdi 2015). This is what Meryam means when she describes the influencer Abir as a woman who has embarked on an entrepreneurial career "without abandoning her traditions". This ethos offers young women like Meryam a relatable model of femininity that appears both traditional and modern. Hence, NGOs like Al-Amal adopt and reproduce this model because it effectively engages their target audience. By using local influencers in its crowdfunding campaign, Al-Amal reinforces and promotes this ethos, presenting it as both aspirational and accessible. The use of these influencers, who embody a virtuous, modern, and entrepreneurial femininity, allows the NGO to project an image that aligns with its values and resonates with audience expectations.

Choosing to collaborate with influencers for crowdfunding promotion is strategic not only because it is more cost-effective than traditional advertising on radio and television (Ashley and Tuten 2015), but also because it reflects a shift in information habits in Morocco, where digital media is increasingly used as a primary source of updates and entertainment³⁷⁰. This shift reflects a broader transformation in contemporary marketing, which focuses less on simply selling products and more on promoting lifestyles and identity models (Ashley and Tuten 2015). Influencers, by portraying their routines, create a sense of authenticity that integrates the products or behaviors they promote into an idealized life that their audience can aspire to. This approach is effective because viewers perceive the products not as mere consumer goods, but as tools to approach a desirable lifestyle. Influencers thus go beyond promoting products; they project an image of self that links individual success and self-affirmation to the consumption of certain products or the adoption of specific behaviors.

³⁷⁰ For an infographic on digital media's infrastructure, access, and usage, see Appendix 5. For a chart detailing the evolution of digital access in Morocco from 2012 to 2023, see the annual reports available on DataReportal's website: <https://datareportal.com/digital-in-morocco>.

The epistemic bubble of “virtuous femininity” operates in such a way that this ideal of femininity becomes the dominant model, leaving little room for alternative or contrasting visions. This model is both the aspiration of the NGO and what it promotes online, effectively becoming the sole reference point while marginalizing or making invisible other representations of femininity. In this bubble, the female figure is idealized as one who combines traditional values with economic and social dynamism, rendering other interpretations of femininity marginal or invisible. In this sense, influencers not only promote products or services; they become advocates for a “virtuous” femininity that aligns with contemporary economic and social imperatives. The model promoted by Al-Amal thus reflects a broader trend in the Moroccan associative landscape, where support for female autonomy is integrated into a public discourse endorsed by reforms promoted by Mohammed VI (such as the Mudawana and the clerical reforms) that emphasize women’s economic and social participation within the normative framework of “Moroccan Islam”.

Organizations like Al-Amal operate as vehicles of this political agenda, proposing models of female empowerment compatible with national policies and development frameworks supported by international donors. At the same time, these organizations provide women with a new social status and access to networks that foster a perception of social mobility. Joining these networks, associating with other women’s groups, and connecting with institutional figures allow beneficiaries to access new opportunities and resources. However, this promotion of female autonomy can also mask deeper structural issues, such as unemployment, that are not directly addressed. Emphasizing individual initiative and entrepreneurship may shift attention away from policies needed to create stable jobs, leaving women to seek “bottom-up” solutions to economic problems that have systemic causes.

Bubble of the “Religious Custodian”

The role of influencers as spokespersons for a message, product, or value system is profoundly shaping social media use, not only in terms of marketing but also in the construction of online communities (Schimkowsky 2020). In the context of religious practices and beliefs, this evolution signals a shift toward a religiosity that values individual experience and the ability to share personal stories, transforming religion into a space of interpersonal connection. Studies on Islam and social media show how an increasing number of religious influencers position themselves as relevant figures, not through academic titles from Islamic institutions or traditional appearance standards, but rather through the creation of accessible, personalized content (Bunt 2018; 2003; 2009). These influencers attract a young, urban, and

tech-savvy audience seeking an authentic and immediate religious experience, one that moves away from doctrinal rigidity and is more oriented toward *orthopraxy* (practice) than *orthodoxy* (dogma) (B. Zaid et al. 2022). These influencers no longer see themselves merely as traditional religious authorities but as content creators capable of offering moral guidance and practical advice on how to live as Muslims in the 21st century. In this way, influencers construct a narrative of religion as a personal and flexible experience that responds to the needs and expectations of a generation accustomed to digital media (Bendahan and Akhiate 2020).

The response of the ulema to the digitalization of Islamic practice reveals an adaptive strategy in which they incorporate the dynamics and communication techniques typical of influencers. Aware of the growing influence of social media and the need to reach a younger audience, the ulema seek to renew their religious authority by adopting a more accessible language and leveraging digital platforms to re-establish direct contact with believers. This adaptation represents an intriguing process of cultural negotiation: while they strive to uphold orthodoxy and traditional values, the ulema employ modern communication forms, using the very tools of those they seek to counter—what they consider the heterodox religious influencers. This transformation signals a reconfiguration of religious authority that adapts to the needs and expectations of the hybrid contexts in which the ulema operate. In this context, religious discourse evolves, expanding its reach and becoming more responsive to the life experiences of the faithful, aiming to offer a religiosity that feels contemporary and relatable.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the comment of Yousra, one of the *murshidāt* at the mosque of Fnideq. The 33 year-old preacher, describes the content of the ulema's Facebook page by stating, "Islam is a religion of ease, not difficulty", paraphrasing a saying of the Prophet Muhammad³⁷¹. With this statement, Yousra expresses a vision of Islam that should be accessible and flexible, avoiding doctrinal rigidity that is often seen as a barrier for the faithful. This assertion reflects a pragmatic view of religion as a practical guide rather than merely a normative framework, capable of responding to needs and contexts, such as those online, that are rapidly evolving. According to the *murshida*, simplifying the religious message involves a reappropriation of Islamic principles, adapting them to be relevant and accessible within the digital context. This approach enables the transmission of traditional values in a form that resonates more with the environment and codes of the online sphere. In this way, the online religious discourse promoted by the ulema moves beyond doctrine and dogma,

³⁷¹ This expression comes from hadith 39 of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, the first of the six canonical hadith collections of Sunni Islam.

evolving into a form of experience. Most importantly, this strategy enables ulema to maintain their role as religious authorities in a competitive digital landscape.

In this sense, interviews and observations within the Ulema Council of M'diq-Fnideq reveal how religious scholars consolidate and reinforce their traditional authority by aligning, in both online discourse and practice, with what I term the model of “custodians of religious authority”. This model, which Moroccan ulema have historically embodied since independence and further entrenched through reforms in the 2000s and 2010s, is now perpetuated digitally through the epistemic bubble created on digital media. This “religious custodian” bubble strengthens Moroccan Islamic values and adapts them to online environments without compromising their link to tradition. On the one hand, this bubble allows for the online reproduction and preservation of a specifically Moroccan orthopraxy: for example, norms such as gender segregation and the promotion of clerical feminization are reaffirmed. On the other hand, the bubble enables centralized control over religious messaging, occupying the online public space with practices and discourses that align with the Maliki doctrine and presenting a vision of religion that resists external influences.

Thus, the epistemic bubble of the “religious custodian” becomes a tool for reinforcing Morocco’s hegemonic religious discourse, allowing it to be disseminated and adapted without distortion. In this context, the ulema’s adoption of social media is not seen as a break with tradition but as a strategy to reframe and re-legitimize Moroccan Islam within a globalized context. This digital use allows for a resemiotization of religious symbols and practices, transforming them into instruments of collective identification, as seen, for example, with the systematic use and dissemination of the *tasmīyya* in the form of hashtags³⁷². In this way, traditional elements of Moroccan Islam are reinterpreted and adapted to the social media context.

This epistemic bubble offers a mechanism of legitimation, allowing the ulema to position themselves as intermediaries between tradition and modernity. This position enables the ulema to uphold an Islamic collective identity aligned with the national reform and modernization project promoted by King Mohammed VI. By adapting traditional Islamic values to contemporary needs and making them more accessible, the ulema provide a form of legitimacy to the normative framework of Moroccan Islam that is also acceptable to a digitally connected generation. This convergence between the ulema’s personal initiative to present themselves as, on the one hand, religious influencers and, on the other hand, custodians of the traditional religious authority, and the state’s institutional strategy centered on the concept of *Islam al-*

³⁷² Resemiotization of *tasmīyya* is discussed in 8.2.2.

wasatiyya, helps consolidate an interpretation of Islam that appears both progressive, authentic, and uniquely Moroccan. This approach facilitates the integration of the societal project of Moroccan Islam into the digital age, adapting it to new technological and social contexts without altering its fundamental normative structure.

Part 3 delves into the core of the online and offline ethnography of the Islam-oriented groups that constitute the focus of the research. While Part 2 offered a diachronic analysis of the construction of power in Morocco, tracing the historical development and consolidation of the normative framework of Moroccan Islam, Part 3 adopts a synchronic perspective. It examines how this normative structure is enacted and reproduced in the everyday interactions of social actors. The analysis underscores that power is not simply imposed “from above” but emerges through the ordinary practices and discourses performed by social actors. At the same time, the analysis highlights the inherently negotiable nature of power. Social actors are not passive executors of predefined norms; instead, they navigate, reinterpret and reshape these structure through their agency, the capacity to act and construct their own singularity within a social context. This agency is expressed through a continuous negotiation of the self within the normative framework.

The pandemic provided a unique opportunity to examine this dynamic. The suspension of ordinary social practices due to the health crisis created conditions that facilitated phenomena such as the hybridization of spaces and the resemiotization of interactions. These shifts enabled a closer observation of how individual subjectivities were reconfigured according to layered experiences of privilege and oppression, offering valuable insights into the interplay between social structures and individual agency. In the conclusions of this thesis, I come back to the field to reflect on how the return to “social normality” after the pandemic has impacted the epistemic bubbles of Islam-oriented groups. This reflection will allow me to reengage with key aspects of my research: the construction of a symbolic system centered on the figure of the king as *amīr al-mu’minīn* and the elaboration of a normative framework that positions Moroccan Islam as an “exception”, operating as a tool for political legitimization and identity differentiation.

CONCLUSIONS

QUEL ISLAM MAROCAIN À L'ÈRE DE L'HYBRIDATION ?



Cov. 5 "Composition marocaine", 1967, painting by Moroccan artist Mohammed Fquih Regragui, displayed at the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (Rabat, September 5, 2021).

En conclusion de cette thèse, je reviens au point de départ. Le titre de cette conclusion, « Quel islam marocain à l'ère de l'hybridation ? », établit délibérément un lien avec le titre du projet MIDA, « *Mediating Islam in the Digital Age* », qui a constitué le socle initial de ma recherche doctorale. En reprenant des expressions similaires (« islam » – « islam marocain », « ère numérique » – « ère de l'hybridation »), j'ai souhaité maintenir une continuité terminologique entre le projet de départ et ces conclusions générales, j'ai souhaité illustrer une évolution terminologique qui reflète l'affinement conceptuel né du processus de recherche. Dans cette thèse, j'ai abordé l'islam au Maroc comme un *all-encompassing system* : à la fois un cadre normatif et un projet sociétal qui oriente comportements et relations sociales. Parallèlement, le terme « ère numérique », englobant une vaste diversité de phénomènes, a été ici réinterprété à partir des observations de terrain. Mon travail s'est ainsi concentré sur une dynamique particulière inhérente à cette ère : l'hybridation des contextes sociaux et spatiaux. Ces dernières pages marquent ainsi la fin d'un cheminement intellectuel, où l'écriture de cette thèse aura elle-même été une forme d'hybridation entre questionnements personnels, réflexion théorique et travail ethnographique.

EN GUISE D'ÉPILOGUE : QUAND LA BULLE EXPLOSE

Comme exposé dans les dernières pages de la troisième partie de cette thèse, le concept de « bulle » est ici employé pour décrire les environnements qui se créent sur les réseaux sociaux, dans lesquels les individus sont principalement exposés à des informations et des opinions qui renforcent leurs croyances existantes, tandis que les perspectives opposées ou divergentes sont ignorées. J'ai démontré comment les « bulles épistémiques » des groupes islamiques³⁷³ constituaient des contextes sociaux compartimentés qui renforçaient ainsi une dynamique d'exposition sélective tendant à isoler les opinions et croyances préexistantes au sein du groupe social. Ce phénomène, a été d'autant plus marquant pendant la pandémie. Pendant cette période, le terme « bulle » a d'ailleurs pris une signification plus large : on a ainsi parlé de « bulle sociale », une mesure adoptée dans de nombreux pays pour restreindre les contacts sociaux et freiner la propagation du virus. La bulle sociale désignait de petits groupes de personnes autorisées à interagir entre elles – souvent les membres d'une famille nucléaire et leurs proches – dans le but de réduire le risque de contagion. Ce type de bulle n'était pas seulement une mesure sanitaire, mais aussi un phénomène social qui a profondément influencé les relations, créant des microcosmes où les interactions et les liens sociaux se sont simultanément intensifiés et restreints.

Pendant le confinement, la « bulle sociale » a permis aux individus d'explorer et de vivre des dimensions online comme jamais auparavant, en utilisant notamment les réseaux sociaux non seulement comme outils de communication, mais comme de véritables espaces de construction

³⁷³ La traduction du terme anglais « *islam-oriented* » en français par « islamique » soulève des problématiques conceptuelles. Comme je l'ai souligné dans l'introduction, section III.I, le terme « *islam-oriented* » reflète, avec davantage de précision que « islamique », la spécificité d'entités sociologiquement diverses, mais unies par leur référence commune à l'islam marocain en tant que cadre normatif. Ce cadre agit comme un référentiel, c'est-à-dire un système de significations, de normes et de valeurs qui sert de point d'ancrage pour les pratiques et les identités sociales. Dans ce contexte précis, l'islam marocain devient un « horizon de sens » qui, bien qu'il se manifeste de manière variée selon les contextes et les dynamiques internes des groupes, constitue un élément structurant de référence. La traduction littérale en français de « *islam-oriented* » par des expressions telles que « orienté vers l'islam » ou « tourné vers l'islam » paraît peu adaptée. C'est pourquoi, tout en étant consciente des limites de cette traduction, j'ai opté pour le terme français « islamique », qui, bien que moins précis, conserve une certaine cohérence avec le registre linguistique et sociologique du français académique.

de réalités partagées. Ce phénomène, bien que présent avant la pandémie, a été significativement accéléré et amplifié pendant la crise sanitaire. Les bulles sociales online ont temporairement remplacé l'expérience physique de l'espace, offrant des espaces publics et privés où les individus pouvaient continuer à communiquer, partager des expériences et construire des récits collectifs. La croissance exponentielle des vidéos en direct sur les principales plateformes sociales témoigne de cette transformation, soulignant la rapidité avec laquelle la sociabilité centrée sur les interactions en face à face a pu se reconstituer les environnements numériques (Gros et al. 2017).

Avec la fin de la pandémie et le retour progressif aux espaces publics physiques, la bulle online a commencé à se dégonfler, remettant en question les théories qui prédisaient une domination définitive de l'Internet dans la vie sociale (Escobar et al. 1994). Plutôt que de remplacer l'espace public physique, l'interaction online a commencé à coexister et à s'entrelacer avec ce dernier de manière inédite. Les dispositifs mobiles, en particulier, ont favorisé un nouveau type de présence hybride ; grâce à leur portabilité et à la connexion continue qu'ils offrent, les individus peuvent désormais naviguer entre les dimensions physique et virtuelle, redéfinissant leur manière d'occuper et d'interagir dans l'espace public. Comme exploré dans la troisième partie de cette thèse, ce phénomène montre que le monde online n'a pas diminué l'importance du contact physique mais a plutôt enrichi l'expérience sociale et spatiale par une intégration fluide entre ces deux sphères, transformant ainsi les modes de socialisation et de participation.

Mener ma recherche dans ce contexte de réalité « suspendue » qu'a été la pandémie a constitué une expérience unique, offrant une perspective privilégiée pour analyser le rôle central des réseaux sociaux à un moment historique où ils concentraient une bonne partie des interactions sociales. Le confinement a révélé la puissance des réseaux sociaux comme outils de construction et de transformation de la réalité sociale, permettant d'explorer comment individus et groupes créent des liens dans un contexte de connexion forcée et prolongée. Cependant, cette condition de « bulle » a posé des limites à ma recherche, en excluant l'observation des pratiques ordinaires des médias numériques par les acteurs sociaux étudiés dans cette thèse. La suspension des pratiques quotidiennes a ainsi introduit un biais qui a complexifié la compréhension de leurs usages d'Internet en dehors de la situation de crise. La période de confinement au Maroc (de 2020 à fin 2021) a certes permis d'observer un modèle d'interaction numérique intensifié, mais elle n'a pas offert une vue des usages courants des réseaux sociaux. Un retour sur le terrain après la fin de la recherche a permis d'esquisser certains aspects de ces mutations.

À la suite de la fin de mon enquête en décembre 2022, un retour progressif à la « normalité » s'est opéré au sein des groupes islamiques objet de cette thèse, à mesure que la période de la pandémie s'éloignait. Les bulles numériques dans lesquelles ces groupes se trouvaient durant cette période ont commencé à prendre de nouvelles formes, façonnées par les dynamiques internes et externes propres à ces groupes. À l'image d'une bulle de savon, les interactions online de ces groupes sont enveloppées dans des frontières certes closes, mais fluides et instables, sensibles aux influences extérieures. Cette sensibilité aux facteurs externes montre combien la cohésion de la bulle est sujette à de rapides transformations, révélant que ces espaces online s'inscrivent dans une hybridation qui interagit étroitement avec les espaces physiques. Cela souligne la porosité de ces frontières, montrant comment les dynamiques online et offline, loin d'être isolées les unes des autres, se nourrissent mutuellement. Ces développements fournissent des indications clés sur la manière dont les dynamiques de pouvoir, les formes d'interaction et les structures d'appartenance façonnent les contextes hybrides dans lesquels évoluent les acteurs sociaux étudiés dans cette thèse.

La première bulle à « éclater » a été celle d'Al-Amal, en raison des transformations survenues après l'élection du nouveau conseil d'administration en septembre 2022, dont les répercussions ont commencé à se faire sentir dans les mois suivants. La fragilisation et la fragmentation de l'ONG étaient en réalité déjà en cours depuis plusieurs années, alimentées par des conflits internes opposant deux factions distinctes : d'un côté, celle d'Aisha, proche du PJD, et de l'autre, celle de Farida, d'orientation plus royaliste. L'élection du nouveau conseil d'administration a cristallisé ces tensions, portant la compétition entre les factions à son paroxysme : en 2023, la présidente sortante Aisha a alors décidé de contester la légitimité de cette nouvelle direction en engageant une action en justice, exacerbant ainsi l'instabilité interne de l'organisation. Ces tensions internes ont également affecté l'image numérique de l'ONG, provoquant une diminution des publications, car le conflit empêchait de projeter une image cohérente et unifiée de l'organisation sur les réseaux sociaux. Cette tendance s'est accentuée au printemps 2023, lorsque Meryam a quitté l'organisation pour accepter une offre d'emploi plus avantageuse à Tanger. Son départ a entraîné une baisse significative de la fréquence des publications sur les pages Facebook et Instagram de l'association, marquant ainsi, au moment où j'écris³⁷⁴, une réduction notable de leur visibilité online.

Cette dynamique met en lumière des aspects fondamentaux de la relation entre digitalisation et engagement Communautaire. L'évolution d'Al-Amal illustre comment la

³⁷⁴ Les conclusions générales de cette thèse ont été rédigées en novembre 2024, les dernières observations online remontent à Novembre 2024 et les derniers contacts avec les interlocuteurs remontent à Aout 2024.

digitalisation des pratiques sociales de l'association a été avant tout une réponse d'urgence face à la pandémie, plutôt qu'un processus structuré et durable. L'abandon progressif des plateformes numériques et des initiatives online, telles que le financement participatif, une fois la crise sanitaire passée, révèle que l'organisation n'a pas intégré de manière organique une stratégie d'engagement communautaire numérique. Après la période de confinement, l'ONG a progressivement rétabli son réseau de contacts associatifs et institutionnels ancrés localement, réaffirmant ainsi ses sources de financement traditionnelles. Ce retour vers un réseau de relations consolidé au niveau local, national et international reflète une préférence pour des modèles de réseautage traditionnels, perçus comme plus stables et durables par rapport à une dépendance aux plateformes numériques et aux modèles de financement participatif. En effet, le crowdfunding représente une stratégie financière aux avantages ponctuels mais fondamentalement instable : il repose sur la visibilité online, l'engagement momentané du public, et des campagnes nécessitant de capter et maintenir en continu l'attention des donateurs potentiels. En l'absence de soutien structuré et d'une base de financement diversifiée, cette approche expose l'organisation à des fluctuations de ressources qui peuvent compromettre sa stabilité financière à long terme.

De plus, le désengagement d'Al-Amal de la sphère numérique révèle l'individualisation de son activité online. L'impact immédiat du départ de Meryam met en évidence que l'identité numérique de l'association n'était pas soutenue par une structure institutionnelle ou standardisée, mais reposait sur une contribution individuelle, apparue principalement durant la pandémie en réponse à une situation exceptionnelle. À la suite du départ de Meryam et au retour aux activités offline, Al-Amal a progressivement réduit son activité online, marquant un retour aux réseaux de soutien ancrés dans des interactions directes et des actions de terrain, et diminuant ainsi l'importance temporaire que les réseaux sociaux avaient acquise. Ainsi, la décision de ne pas recruter de nouveau responsable pour les réseaux sociaux pourrait refléter une vision de la sphère numérique comme un complément à la mission de l'ONG, plutôt que comme un outil central, dans un contexte où l'ancrage territorial reste prioritaire. Ce choix semble également indiquer une préférence pour des pratiques de communication plus ponctuelles et spontanées, mobilisées en fonction des besoins immédiats, plutôt que pour une stratégie de communication numérique permanente.

Contrairement à Al-Amal, la bulle numérique des ulémas de M'diq a pris une importance croissante, en transformant la page Facebook du conseil d'un simple outil temporaire en un instrument stabilisé pour la promotion des activités des oulémas. Au moment où j'écris, la page s'est consolidée en tant que vitrine privilégiée pour afficher les initiatives religieuses et

culturelles du conseil, élargissant la capacité de l'institution à atteindre et maintenir une visibilité continue. L'usage des réseaux sociaux, initialement adopté comme solution d'urgence durant la pandémie pour pallier la perte d'interactions directes, s'est consolidé dans la période post-pandémique. Cette différence de stratégies met en lumière une différence structurelle entre le conseil des oulémas et des organisations comme Al-Amal.

En tant qu'entité hiérarchique et institutionnelle, le conseil mène des activités régulières qui exigent une capacité constante d'attraction et d'engagement du public. Dans ce contexte, les réseaux sociaux deviennent un canal indispensable pour élargir la portée de ses actions et maintenir un lien constant avec la communauté, renforçant ainsi l'autorité et la visibilité de l'institution. À l'inverse, pour Al-Amal, l'objectif principal n'est pas tant l'élargissement de son public, mais plutôt la consolidation des ressources financières nécessaires au lancement de projets ciblés. Pour l'ONG, les réseaux sociaux ont donc une fonction utilitaire : durant le confinement, ils ont remplacé les pratiques traditionnelles de collecte de fonds et de promotion, permettant à l'association de rassembler des ressources et de la visibilité dans un moment où les interactions directes étaient restreintes. Cependant, une fois rétablies les bases de soutien local et la possibilité de reprendre les activités en présentiel, les réseaux sociaux ont progressivement perdu de leur importance pour Al-Amal.

La comparaison de l'évolution numérique de ces deux institutions permet de formuler des hypothèses sur le rôle sociopolitique qu'elles occupent dans la société marocaine. D'un côté, bien qu'ayant investi dans la digitalisation, Al-Amal n'a pas maintenu une présence online stable ; de l'autre, le conseil des oulémas, sans investissement spécifique dans le numérique, a renforcé sa présence online. Ce contraste reflète la position sociale distincte et les mandats spécifiques de chaque institution. Le conseil des oulémas représente une institution religieuse légitimée par l'État, dotée d'une hiérarchie solide et d'une identité institutionnalisée. Sa mission intrinsèque est la diffusion et l'ancrage d'un message religieux en adéquation avec les critères du modèle normatif dominant au Maroc, celui défini dans cette thèse comme « islam marocain » ou « islam du juste milieu ». Dans ce cadre, les oulémas servent non seulement la monarchie en tant que garants d'un islam officiel et normatif, mais aussi comme promoteurs d'un projet sociétal hégémonique dans le pays. Ce phénomène met en évidence la capacité de l'État marocain à intégrer les nouveaux canaux de communication, tels que les réseaux sociaux, dans sa stratégie de légitimation. Cette adaptation souligne la flexibilité des institutions marocaines dans leur quête de maintenir et adapter leur hégémonie en exploitant les espaces

de médiation émergents. En investissant ces canaux, l'État peut prolonger son influence, ajuster ses messages en fonction des publics, et renforcer son autorité de manière constante³⁷⁵.

L'impact de la guerre en Palestine sur le groupe syndical étudiant OREMA a également provoqué l'« explosion » d'une bulle. Le 7 octobre 2023 marque le début d'une nouvelle phase dramatique du conflit israélo-palestinien, déclenchée par une attaque terroriste du parti et groupe armé islamiste Hamas, suivie d'une riposte sans précédent de l'État et des forces armées israéliennes. Au moment où j'écris, l'escalade du conflit au Moyen-Orient, marquée par l'extension de la guerre menée par Israël au Liban, a des répercussions significatives pour les communautés arabo-musulmanes à travers le monde. OREMA, qui se définit comme « antisioniste » et « en faveur de la proclamation d'un État palestinien », avec certains membres contestant la légitimité de l'État d'Israël, a rapidement mobilisé ses groupes locaux après le 7 octobre, organisant une série d'activités de soutien au peuple palestinien et de protestation contre Israël, « l'ennemi sioniste ». Depuis cette date, les forums internes d'OREMA Tétouan sont presque exclusivement consacrés à la question palestinienne, et l'activité sur les pages Facebook et Instagram du groupe a crû de manière exponentielle, avec des publications entièrement axées sur ce sujet. Dans les campus universitaires du Maroc, les initiatives propalestiniennes se sont également multipliées.

Outre les manifestations sur les campus, auxquelles ont participé non seulement OREMA mais aussi toutes les autres factions syndicales, des sit-in hebdomadaires se sont déroulés dans les principales villes du pays, avec une mobilisation notable de l'opinion publique en soutien au peuple palestinien. Interrogés sur la mobilisation, les militants d'OREMA Tétouan ont souligné que les dirigeants du PJD n'ont pas participé aux rassemblements, par crainte de représailles de la foule car jugés comme les responsables du processus de « normalisation » entre Maroc et Israël. En effet, à l'exception des partis et mouvements de gauche antisystème et des militants du MUR³⁷⁶, aucun acteur politique reconnu par l'État n'a pris part aux manifestations. En revanche, les activistes d'OREMA ont observé un rôle dominant du mouvement islamiste AWI dans la coordination des protestations marocaines propalestiniennes³⁷⁷. Selon les jeunes d'OREMA, cette dynamique a conduit de nombreux sympathisants déçus du PJD à se tourner vers l'AWI. Quant aux institutions de l'État, la monarchie et le gouvernement se trouvent dans une position délicate. Le communiqué de Mohammed VI du 17 octobre, appelant à la protection des civils et à un engagement

³⁷⁵ Je reviens sur la construction du pouvoir au Maroc dans les sections II et III de la conclusion.

³⁷⁶ Pour un approfondissement sur le Mouvement Unité et Réforme, voir Part 2, 5.2.2.

³⁷⁷ Pour un approfondissement sur l'organisation *al-'adl wa al-ihsān*, voir Part 2, 5.2.2.

international pour contenir l'escalade des hostilités, reflète une volonté de maintenir un équilibre politique et diplomatique avec Israël, tout en cherchant à prévenir une intensification des manifestations dans le pays³⁷⁸.

Ce contexte, à la fois national et international, a influencé les pratiques online d'OREMA. À l'heure où j'écris, le site officiel d'OREMA est fermé, et la page de Tétouan, ainsi que celles d'autres sections locales, ont été rendues privées, laissant entrevoir des dynamiques d'adaptation et des tensions internes au sein du syndicat étudiant. Interrogés sur la fermeture du site, certains militants estiment qu'elle est due à des « raisons techniques », bien que cette opinion ne repose pas sur des informations vérifiées. Ils avancent que le site, devenu obsolète, aurait été progressivement remplacé par une présence accrue sur des réseaux sociaux comme Instagram, aussi au détriment de plateformes traditionnelles telles que Facebook. Les raisons de la privatisation de la page Facebook d'OREMA Tétouan permettent toutefois de nuancer cette interprétation. Fatima, responsable de la page jusqu'à la fin de 2022, rapporte qu'après le 7 octobre 2023, certains commentaires critiques envers la position du roi sur la question palestinienne ont poussé le groupe à limiter l'accès public à la page, dans le but d'éviter d'éventuelles sanctions du régime.

L'intensification des activités online et offline, accompagnée d'une logique croissante d'entre-soi dans les espaces de socialisation d'OREMA, reflète une évolution dans le positionnement du groupe syndical étudiant. La place centrale accordée à la question palestinienne dans les initiatives d'OREMA marque un renforcement de l'identité politique du groupe, qui semble aussi répondre au vide laissé par un PJD en perte de consensus. Ce changement peut être interprété comme une tentative de reconstruire une identité pour OREMA, visant à reconquérir un espace de représentation pour les jeunes activistes, proches des idées islamistes mais ne mettant pas en discussion le pouvoir politique et religieux du roi. En ce sens, le lien entre OREMA et le MUR, qui s'est distancé, quoique de manière informelle, du PJD après les élections de 2021, suggère une redéfinition des alliances et l'ouverture à de nouveaux scénarios politiques. Ces changements internes pourraient indiquer une tentative d'OREMA et du MUR de regagner en crédibilité après la défaite politique et idéologique du PJD. Cependant, la montée en puissance de l'AWI, tant dans le syndicalisme étudiant que dans la société marocaine, représente un défi majeur pour OREMA et le MUR. L'AWI, dotée d'une structure interne solide, d'une discipline hiérarchique rigoureuse et d'une présence bien ancrée

³⁷⁸ Cependant, ni le roi ni les leaders politiques n'ont remis en question la « normalisation » des relations avec Israël ou le développement des liens diplomatiques et économiques avec ce pays, malgré la pression de l'opinion publique. Voir, Omar Brouksy, « Maroc. Manifestations populaires et silence royal », *Orient XXI*, January 31, 2017, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/la-politique-migratoire-marocaine-un-exemple-a-suivre>, 1689

sur le terrain, renforce progressivement son influence, notamment en tirant parti de sa position « intacte » par rapport aux acteurs politiques ayant accédé au pouvoir et en étant perçus comme compromis par le système.

Les transformations au sein des groupes islamiques survenues après la fin de ma recherche révèlent les modalités variées par lesquelles ces acteurs sociaux naviguent et s'approprient les sphères online et offline. Elles confirment que l'hybridation, telle qu'analysée dans cette thèse, n'est ni homogène ni permanente : elle s'adapte de manière flexible aux besoins, aux dynamiques et aux contraintes spécifiques de chaque acteur. Comme je l'ai montré dans la troisième partie de cette thèse, contrairement à l'idée reçue qui présente l'espace online comme un lieu de « libération » ou de « résistance » au cadre normatif, la subjectivité des acteurs qui se reconfigure dans ce processus d'hybridation se centre sur des formes d'*agency* qui, loin de contester les normes en place, les renforcent et les accommodent activement.

Dans les deux sections suivantes, je retrace le fil conducteur qui a guidé la rédaction de cette thèse, à savoir la manière dont le pouvoir se structure et se répand au Maroc. Dans la section II, je reviens sur la manière dont le système symbolique et le modèle normatif marocain sont construits et consolidés, en mettant l'accent sur le rôle central joué par la figure de l'*amīr al-mu'minīn*. Dans la section III, je reprends la question posée en guise de titre de ces conclusions (« quel islam marocain à l'ère numérique ? »), en mettant en lumière comment les acteurs sociaux pris en compte dans cette thèse contribuent à reproduire et à légitimer le cadre normatif dans lequel ils agissent, tout en consolidant leur propre légitimité au sein de celui-ci.

*AMĪR AL-MU'MINĪN*OU LA TRADITIONALISATION DE LA MODERNITÉ

Cette thèse s'appuie sur le postulat selon lequel la société marocaine est imprégnée d'un capital symbolique intrinsèquement lié à l'islam. Ce capital se manifeste à travers trois formes principales d'autorité : l'érudition juridique (*ilm*), le pouvoir spirituel (*baraka*) et la noblesse sacrée issue de la descendance prophétique (chérifisme). Bien qu'elles ne soient pas explicitement politiques, ces formes d'autorité constituent le fondement symbolique du pouvoir en islam, montrant ainsi que pouvoir spirituel et pouvoir politique sont profondément interconnectés. L'incarnation de ces trois dimensions, comme c'est le cas pour la monarchie alaouite, permet d'exercer une forme de pouvoir total. Dans ce cadre, l'islam devient un élément central pour structurer l'ordre politique et social marocain. Au cours de la deuxième partie de cette thèse, à travers une approche historique et sociologique, j'ai montré comment, au Maroc, l'islam est perçu comme un projet de société incarné par la figure du sultan-roi. Ce projet sociétal repose sur la légitimité de la monarchie alaouite, qui se présente comme garante de l'unité nationale et de la continuité historique du Maroc. L'islam, dans ce contexte, est avant tout mobilisé comme un instrument symbolique servant à légitimer le pouvoir royal, en attribuant au roi le double rôle de gardien spirituel et politique, celui d'*amīr al-mu'minīn* (Commandeur des croyants).

La construction de la figure du sultan-roi comme symbole d'unité nationale et de continuité avec un passé précolonial a commencé dès les premières décennies du XXe siècle, au sein du nationalisme marocain. Dans la thèse, j'ai analysé comment le mouvement nationaliste marocain a construit une communauté imaginée reposant sur deux principes majeurs. Le premier principe est celui de l'unité du territoire et de la langue, formulée en réaction à la fragmentation ethnolinguistique imposée par le conquérant extérieur, un processus qui évoque les dynamiques de construction des États-nations européens. Le second est la continuité traditionnelle, centrée sur l'union de la *umma* autour de la figure du Commandeur des croyants. Face à la politique coloniale française, qui cherchait à fragmenter

la société marocaine selon des divisions ethnolinguistiques, les nationalistes ont réagi en promouvant une vision de la nation unifiée et cohérente, fondée sur l'invention d'une continuité historique et culturelle propre au Maroc. La campagne de protestation contre le dahir berbère et l'institution de rituels tels que la Fête du Trône illustrent ce processus.

Cependant, cette vision de l'unité nationale résulte d'un processus de réappropriation symbolique mené par les nationalistes marocains. Ces derniers ont récupéré et réinterprété des symboles que les autorités coloniales françaises avaient auparavant réinventés pour légitimer leur domination sur le Maroc. Parmi ces symboles figurent le drapeau marocain et la figure même du sultan, que les Français avaient utilisés pour appuyer leur rôle de protecteurs et leur projet colonial. En détournant ces symboles de leur fonction initiale, les nationalistes marocains leur ont attribué une nouvelle signification. Ils les ont transformés en emblèmes de la résistance anticoloniale et en symboles de la continuité de la souveraineté marocaine. Ce retournement stratégique a permis non seulement de s'opposer au discours colonial, mais également de redéfinir ces éléments comme des marqueurs d'un projet national fondé sur l'unité et l'indépendance. Ainsi réappropriés, ces symboles ont servi à fédérer la population marocaine autour d'une identité nationale commune et d'un rejet explicite de l'ordre colonial. Ce phénomène complexe de réappropriation trouve son incarnation dans la figure de Mohammed V.

Mohammed V, initialement désigné sultan par le protectorat français pour asseoir sa domination en s'appuyant sur des alliances stratégiques avec les élites locales, a su redéfinir son rôle en passant d'un simple outil du pouvoir colonial à un symbole d'unité nationale. Pendant la période du protectorat, il a réussi à maintenir un équilibre subtil entre les aspirations croissantes du mouvement nationaliste marocain et les exigences du protectorat français. Cette capacité de médiation lui a permis d'acquérir progressivement une autonomie politique, renforçant son rôle de rassembleur grâce au soutien des nationalistes et en s'affirmant comme une figure incontournable dans le processus d'indépendance. Le rôle de Mohammed V a été déterminant pour garantir une transition politique du protectorat à l'État-nation sans passer par des processus révolutionnaires. Cela représente une différence significative par rapport à la plupart des pays de la région, où l'élite militaire impliquée dans la lutte pour l'indépendance des puissances coloniales a accédé au pouvoir (comme ce fut le cas, par exemple, en Égypte, en Libye, mais aussi en Algérie). Dans l'après-indépendance, Mohammed V a posé les bases du rôle central de la monarchie dans le Maroc contemporain, en consolidant le contrôle royal sur les aspects spatiaux, symboliques et classificatoires de la politique marocaine.

Ce mécanisme d'adaptation de la monarchie marocaine, que je définis ici sous le concept de « traditionalisation de la modernité », lui a conféré une légitimité durable, renforçant son rôle central dans la construction de l'identité nationale post-indépendance. Avec l'avènement de Hassan II, cette stratégie a été scellée à travers la constitutionnalisation de la figure de l'*amīr al-mu'minīn*. Ce titre, profondément enraciné dans la tradition islamique et évoquant l'autorité spirituelle et politique exercée par les califes, a été intégré au rôle de chef de la nation et formalisé dans le cadre juridique de la constitution, fondement de tout État moderne. Cette intégration a permis à la monarchie marocaine de s'affirmer comme le centre unique de légitimité et d'autorité, tant sur le plan politique que religieux. Dans cette optique, la figure du Commandeur des croyants incarne parfaitement le système symbolique de la traditionalisation de la modernité, à travers lequel le pouvoir au Maroc s'est construit. L'*amīr al-mu'minīn*, en tant que garant d'une double souveraineté, à la fois religieuse et temporelle, symbolise ce dualisme fondamental. Tout en préservant les traits du sultan traditionnel, il incarne également la figure du roi moderne, chef de la nation. Ce rôle hybride reflète une continuité entre une légitimité dynastique et spirituelle, d'une part, et une souveraineté populaire, d'autre part, cette dernière s'étant renforcée sous l'effet des transformations sociopolitiques du XX^e siècle. Ainsi, la traditionalisation de la modernité, qui juxtapose la légitimité symbolique issue du pouvoir traditionnel à la structuration du pouvoir moderne, a permis à la monarchie marocaine de s'adapter à une société en évolution sans perdre son autorité.

Il est intéressant de noter que cette capacité d'adaptation du pouvoir monarchique marocain trouve ses racines dans l'époque du protectorat français. Dans la thèse, je souligne comment, à la différence d'autres stratégies coloniales, les autorités françaises au Maroc ont choisi de préserver et renforcer les institutions traditionnelles marocaines, notamment le Makhzen (système pré-colonial de gouvernance et d'autorité centrale), tout en les intégrant à des éléments issus de l'État moderne. Cette approche a donné lieu à une juxtaposition de systèmes qui, bien que distincts, se sont influencés mutuellement : sur le plan politique, le Makhzen fut complété par un appareil bureaucratique inspiré des modèles étatiques européens ; sur le plan culturel, la figure traditionnelle du sultan fut associée à celle du roi moderne ; Sur le plan symbolique, la médina marocaine, emblème urbanistique de la tradition, fut juxtaposée à la « ville nouvelle », quartiers conçus selon des normes urbanistiques européennes. Comme examiné le chapitre 5 de la thèse, la monarchie marocaine a tiré parti de cette juxtaposition. Dans un premier temps, elle l'a utilisée pour renforcer sa légitimité face au colonialisme. Par la suite, elle s'est appuyée sur cette dualité pour intégrer les transformations

sociales, politiques et culturelles tout en les réinterprétant dans un discours qui mettait l'accent sur une continuité ininterrompue avec la tradition.

La traditionalisation de la modernité peut ainsi être appréhendée comme un système symbolique dont le référentiel trouve son expression la plus significative dans la figure du Commandeur des croyants, qui incarne à la fois l'unité et la continuité du pouvoir. Ainsi, toute transformation sociale, politique ou culturelle est interprétée à travers un référentiel précis. En même temps, tout changement échappant à ce référentiel est perçu non seulement comme une menace directe pour l'autorité centrale, mais également comme un danger majeur pour la cohésion du corps social dans son ensemble. Ce système symbolique constitue le socle du cadre normatif marocain, désigné dans cette thèse comme « islam marocain ». Loin de se limiter à une simple tradition religieuse, cet islam marocain s'impose comme un véritable projet de société, visant à structurer et orienter les dynamiques sociales. J'ai montré que tout contre-projet, c'est-à-dire toute initiative qui s'inscrit en dehors des limites de ce cadre normatif, fait l'objet d'une neutralisation systématique qui s'opère à travers des mécanismes de répression et de cooptation mis en œuvre par le pouvoir.

Ainsi, ces dynamiques peuvent être analysées à la lumière de la théorie sur la construction du pouvoir telle qu'élaborée par le philosophe Michel Foucault. Bien que cette problématique imprègne l'ensemble de l'œuvre de Foucault, mon analyse du pouvoir au Maroc s'appuie sur sa conceptualisation des « mécaniques du pouvoir » (Foucault 1975, 162), qu'il développe entre 1975 et 1978 et qu'il structure en deux grandes formes : la discipline et la sécurité. Cette thèse s'est efforcée de formuler l'hypothèse selon laquelle le pouvoir marocain combine ces deux mécanismes pour asseoir son autorité. Ainsi, les dynamiques à travers lesquelles le cadre normatif de l'islam marocain se construit et se renforce peuvent être analysées sous le prisme des mécanismes disciplinaires. Selon Foucault, la discipline constitue une forme d'exercice du pouvoir reposant sur l'imposition d'une norme par une autorité, laquelle dresse ce que l'on peut distinguer de normal et d'anormal (Foucault 1976; 2004b). Le dispositif disciplinaire vise à corriger les comportements jugés déviants à travers des pratiques spécifiques telles que la surveillance, la punition et le dressage, assurant ainsi la conformité à la norme établie (Foucault 1975). Les épisodes de répression au Maroc, caractérisés par des emprisonnements et des actes de torture, observés tant durant les années de plomb que sous le règne de Mohammed VI, peuvent être interprétés comme des pratiques visant à instaurer un contrôle disciplinaire, notamment par le recours à « l'individualisation » des peines (Ibid. 1975, 117).

Cependant, le pouvoir marocain ne s'appuie pas uniquement sur ce dispositif. Son mode de contrôle combine un mécanisme disciplinaire avec des stratégies de « normalisation »,

caractéristiques des dispositifs de sécurité tels que définis par Foucault. Alors que la discipline repose sur une norme prédéfinie utilisée comme point de référence pour conformer la société, le dispositif de sécurité, lui, repère les diverses « courbes de normalité » afin de réguler les écarts (opération de normalisation) les plus marqués par rapport à ces courbes (Foucault 2004b, 66). Ainsi, dans la mécanique du pouvoir marocain, les oppositions les plus marquées à la norme sont disciplinées par des mesures explicites, tandis que les écarts plus subtils sont absorbés. La normalisation ne se manifeste donc pas par une imposition directe ou visible, mais opère à travers un ensemble de normes, de pratiques et de valeurs que les individus intériorisent progressivement. Une fois ces éléments assimilés, ils sont perçus comme naturels. Selon Foucault, la normalisation mobilise des processus subtils d'incorporation, par lesquels les individus se soumettent volontairement au cadre normatif en le considérant comme évident et nécessaire (Foucault 1976).

L'analyse de cette double articulation du pouvoir marocain, à la fois disciplinaire et sécuritaire, constitue le cœur des deux parties de cette thèse. Dans la deuxième partie, j'ai mené une analyse diachronique visant à montrer comment le pouvoir au Maroc se construit à travers la définition de la norme et le disciplinement des individus en fonction de cette norme. Dans la troisième partie, j'ai adopté une perspective synchronique pour examiner les mécanismes de normalisation mis en œuvre par le pouvoir sur les individus, et la manière dont ces derniers les réinterprètent selon leurs différentes formes d'*agency*. En m'appuyant sur une approche ethnographique, j'ai examiné comment ces normes sont intériorisées par les acteurs sociaux que j'ai définis comme « *Islam-oriented* » (définis en français « islam-orientés »), c'est-à-dire activement dirigés vers le projet sociétal de l'islam marocain. Ces acteurs se positionnent à des points précis au sein du spectre de « normalité » proposé par ce cadre normatif : certains, comme les oulémas, constituent des rouages essentiels du système ; d'autres, comme l'association Al-Amal, jouent un rôle d'alliés ; tandis que d'autres encore, comme l'organisation OREMA, agissent en tant que médiateurs stratégiques.

Un aspect fondamental qui se dégage de cette recherche est que ces individus construisent leur subjectivité à travers des formes d'*agency* qui ne remettent pas en cause la norme, mais ils y adhèrent, en négociant leur place par des mécanismes de légitimation, d'émancipation et d'accommodement. Ces dynamiques ont révélé une interaction particulière entre acteurs sociaux islam-orientés et modèle normatif de l'islam marocain. Dans les pages suivantes, je vais revisiter cette interaction en mobilisant la théorie foucauldienne de la normalisation. Ainsi, l'idée d'« exception marocaine », qui donne le titre à la deuxième partie de la thèse, sera appréhendée comme un élément constitutif de cette normalisation.

TISSER LA TOILE DE L'EXCEPTION MAROCAINE

Lors des soulèvements liés aux Printemps arabes, le concept d'« exception marocaine » s'est largement diffusé dans les médias nationaux et internationaux pour qualifier la position singulière du Maroc. Ce terme a été employé pour souligner la spécificité de la manière dont le royaume a répondu aux protestations, se démarquant des autres pays du Maghreb. Contrairement à ces derniers, le Maroc est le seul pays de la région à ne pas avoir connu de changement de régime politique ou de leadership à la suite des révoltes. Alors que les mouvements de protestation ont engendré des bouleversements profonds dans d'autres contextes, le roi du Maroc est resté en place, répondant aux contestations par une proposition de réforme constitutionnelle. Cette approche a conduit les médias à présenter le royaume comme une « exception », souvent décrit comme un modèle de compromis vertueux entre le souverain et le peuple (Abouyoub 2012). Cependant, les revendications majeures portées par les mobilisations populaires n'ont pas été satisfaites. Les demandes de transformation de la structure politico-juridique de l'État, de transfert effectif du pouvoir au Parlement et aux institutions élues, ainsi que l'établissement de principes de légitimité électorale et de responsabilité des gouvernants, ont été rejetées par Mohammed VI. En dépit de l'apparente ouverture vers une libéralisation politique, la monarchie a conservé un contrôle strict du pouvoir, soulevant des interrogations sur la nature de cette exception marocaine.

À ce propos, le politologue Omar Saghi souligne que, plus qu'un modèle de gouvernance vertueuse, l'exception marocaine résulte de la combinaison d'un « fantasme colonial et de l'insularité historique » du Maroc par rapport au Maghreb (Saghi 2012, 152). Selon Saghi, le Maroc, colonisé tardivement, a été marqué par l'influence d'officiers français nostalgiques d'une société d'ordre médiévale et opposés aux principes progressistes de la Troisième République. Cette vision a trouvé une application concrète dans un pays qui, pendant quatre siècles, était resté en marge du monde arabo-méditerranéen sous l'hégémonie ottomane. Le Maroc avait alors conservé son propre système de gouvernement, le Makhzen, et une légitimité religieuse qui n'avait pas été remise en question. Pour le politologue, cette configuration

particulière a permis au royaume de traverser les grands bouleversements mondiaux sans que ses structures politiques et symboliques ne subissent de changements radicaux (Ibid. 2012).

Cependant, je propose une lecture différente de l'idée d'exception marocaine. À mon sens, elle ne se limite pas à la combinaison de processus historiques et politiques évoqués par Saghi. À la lumière de mes recherches, cette notion peut être interprétée, d'une part, comme l'un des nombreux outils symboliques qui soutiennent et réinforment le pouvoir au Maroc. Les analyses historiques et sociologiques conduites pendant ma recherche ont en effet démontré comment la rhétorique de l'exception marocaine dissimule un système symbolique et un cadre normatif fondé sur la légitimation religieuse de l'autorité politique, et, inversement, la reconnaissance politique du chef religieux. D'autre part, cette rhétorique fonctionne également comme modèle de référence au « normal » à partir duquel les individus construisent leur subjectivité. En ce sens, mon travail ethnographique a montré que chez les acteurs sociaux islam-orientés, l'exception marocaine s'exprime par le biais d'une narration et d'une auto-narration centrées sur l'idée de représenter, défendre et incarner le « bon islam ». Ces récits s'articulent autour de notions qui mettent en avant une spécificité vertueuse ou une « séparation équilibrée », d'un point de vue religieux, social, culturel et historique par rapport aux autres contextes régionaux.

Le discours sur l'exception marocaine apparaît alors comme un mécanisme de normalisation. En m'appuyant sur la théorie foucauldienne, j'ai montré dans la section précédente que la normalisation constitue l'une des dimensions fondamentales de la construction du pouvoir au Maroc. Ce pouvoir ne s'exerce pas uniquement sous une forme disciplinaire, mais aussi de manière productive : il produit des identités, des comportements et des récits que les individus intériorisent, les percevant comme naturels et légitimes. Ainsi, le pouvoir ne se limite pas à soumettre les individus à l'ordre établi ; il les façonne en acteurs engagés dans leur propre construction de soi au sein de cet ordre. Selon Foucault, ce processus donne naissance à des « sujets » au double sens du terme : à la fois des individus assujettis à l'ordre du pouvoir, et des acteurs participant activement à leur propre construction de soi. Foucault appelle ce processus « subjectivation » (2004, 391–392), en mettant en évidence qu'il s'agit d'un processus dynamique qui évolue en fonction des contextes historiques, des pratiques sociales et des discours dominants.

Sans entrer dans les détails de la pensée foucauldienne, on pourra souligner que, selon Foucault, la subjectivation repose sur deux dimensions étroitement liées. La première, appelée « assujettissement » (1975, 32–34), désigne le processus par lequel les structures de pouvoir et les discours normatifs façonnent le sujet en imposant des modèles de pensée et de

comportement. La seconde, que Foucault nomme « pratiques de soi » (Foucault 1984, 61–63), renvoie aux actions par lesquelles les individus modifient leur rapport à eux-mêmes. Ces pratiques offrent aux individus la possibilité de se constituer en tant que sujets éthiques et moraux, en ouvrant un espace pour résister, au moins partiellement, aux mécanismes d’assujettissement. Cette seconde dimension revêt une importance particulière, car elle met en lumière un principe fondamental de la pensée de Foucault résumé en la fameuse phrase : « là où il y a pouvoir, il y a résistance et pourtant, ou plutôt par là même, celle-ci n’est jamais en position d’extériorité par rapport au pouvoir » (1976, 125). Ainsi, selon Foucault, le processus de subjectivation intègre toujours une dimension de *subordination-résistance* au pouvoir.

Tout en reconnaissant la pertinence de la subjectivation comme outil analytique pour comprendre la formation de la subjectivité au sein des dynamiques de pouvoir, j’ai démontré que, dans le cas des groupes islam-orientés, la dichotomie résistance-soumission, telle qu’elle est formulée dans le concept foucauldien, ne suffit pas à saisir la complexité des stratégies de construction de soi des acteurs sociaux. L’anthropologue Lila Abu-Lughod a montré que, dans les études portant sur les dynamiques de pouvoir depuis les années 1980, une attention disproportionnée a souvent été accordée à l’identification de figures de « résistants », au détriment d’une analyse approfondie des implications de ces formes de résistance dans les mécanismes mêmes du pouvoir (Abu-Lughod 1990, 41). Selon Abu-Lughod, interpréter toute forme de résistance comme une preuve de l’inefficacité des systèmes de domination conduit à une romantisation de la résistance, perçue uniquement comme une expression de la résilience et de la créativité de l’esprit humain. Une telle perspective tend cependant à uniformiser les différentes formes de résistance, en négligeant des aspects essentiels liés aux mécanismes de pouvoir qu’elles impliquent ou qu’elles reproduisent parfois.

Saba Mahmood prolonge la réflexion d’Abu-Lughod en mettant en lumière les risques liés à l’usage de la catégorie de résistance, qui peut enfermer l’analyse du pouvoir dans le cadre de la « téléologie propre à la politique progressiste » (Mahmood 2005, 24). Cette perspective repose sur l’hypothèse, caractéristique du féminisme universaliste occidental, d’un désir universel d’émancipation vis-à-vis des structures de domination masculine. Selon Mahmood, une telle approche limite la capacité à reconnaître et à comprendre des façons d’être et d’agir qui ne s’inscrivent pas nécessairement comme des actes de subversion ou de reformulation des normes. L’anthropologue critique cette vision en soulignant que « dans le féminisme comme dans le libéralisme, la liberté est normative, et ceux qui cherchent à limiter la liberté des femmes sont critiqués plus sévèrement que ceux qui cherchent à l’étendre » (Mahmood 2005, 25).

En m'appuyant sur l'analyse de Mahmood, qui réévalue l'agency féminine au-delà de la dichotomie résistance-soumission, j'ai montré, dans la troisième partie de cette thèse, que les acteurs sociaux islam-orientés ne fondent pas leurs pratiques de soi sur une opposition directe ou une résistance explicite au pouvoir. Au contraire, ils négocient leurs subjectivités en s'inscrivant activement dans les discours de normalisation. L'analyse ethnographique de ces groupes, dans les contextes online et offline, a révélé que l'*agency* ne s'exprime pas nécessairement par des actes de rébellion ou de contestation frontale. Elle prend plutôt la forme de démarches visant à obtenir reconnaissance et validation au sein du système symbolique et du cadre normatif marocain. En d'autres termes, ces acteurs ne cherchent pas à renverser les normes, mais à négocier une position légitime et digne à l'intérieur de ces dernières. Les données recueillies montrent comment ces individus parviennent à acquérir visibilité, reconnaissance et légitimation en s'appropriant activement un système de valeurs, de codes et de pratiques qui constitue la norme sociale dans les contextes où ils évoluent. Ce processus, loin d'être une résistance aux dynamiques de pouvoir, s'apparente à une négociation subtile, permettant à ces acteurs d'obtenir une reconnaissance sociale et d'améliorer leur position au sein de la structure sociale existante.

Dans cette perspective, des pratiques qui pourraient, à première vue, sembler être des signes de résistance ou de subordination nécessitent une analyse plus nuancée et contextualisée. Réduire les choix esthétiques et éthiques de Meryam – notamment son attention portée à sa tenue vestimentaire sa reappropriation de sa spiritualité – à de simples actes de libération personnelle serait réducteur. Ces pratiques s'inscrivent dans un cadre de valeurs où l'appropriation de certains symboles matériels et culturels permet d'accéder à des rôles sociaux plus valorisés et mieux reconnus à l'intérieur du cadre normatif. De la même manière, la médiation religieuse exercée par Tariq sur les réseaux sociaux ne peut être considérée comme une simple soumission à l'autorité religieuse dominante. Comme l'a démontré l'ethnographie, les réseaux sociaux jouent avant tout le rôle d'outils de connexion avec son audience, outils à travers lesquels Tariq renforce sa position et son rôle au sein de la communauté religieuse locale. Dans les deux cas, il ne s'agit ni d'une opposition frontale ni d'une adhésion passive au pouvoir, mais d'une négociation qui permet aux individus d'adhérer aux structures de pouvoir tout en définissant leur statut de manière stratégique. En ce sens, les récits de vie de Meryam, Fatima et Tariq ont révélé que les références au « bon islam » ou à « l'islam du juste milieu », fréquemment mobilisées par ces acteurs sociaux, bien qu'elles diffèrent d'un individu à l'autre, traduisent toutes divers degrés d'adhésion active à un spectre de « normalité » compatible avec le système de pouvoir marocain.

Cela a révélé la diversité des visions et des discours qui gravitent autour de ce même cadre normatif, chacun des acteurs sociaux interprétant sa propre perspective comme étant la « vérité ». Les interlocuteurs de ma recherche, en incarnant des rôles sociaux, culturels et religieux, se présentent comme des porte-parole de modèles de citoyenneté vertueuse, en conformité avec le cadre normatif en vigueur. Cette conformité ne se limite pas à une simple acceptation passive, mais implique une reconfiguration active de leur subjectivité au sein de ce cadre. Les pratiques et discours quotidiens des acteurs islam-orientés montrent que l'exception marocaine, en tant que mécanisme de normalisation, se manifeste comme une « toile » en perpétuel tissage. Cette toile se fabrique à travers une série de comportements, de discours et d'idées perçus comme « normaux » et qui participent à la production des subjectivités. Ainsi, l'ethnographie menée auprès des groupes islam-orientés a mis en évidence comment, pour reprendre les mots de Foucault, le pouvoir se présente en tant que « multiplicité de rapports de force immanents au domaine où ils s'exercent, et constitutifs de leur organisation » (Foucault 1976, 74).

Cette vision suppose que le pouvoir n'est ni concentré en un lieu précis ni exercé par une autorité unique. Au contraire, il se manifeste partout, car il prend naissance dans les relations entre individus et groupes : « le pouvoir est partout ; ce n'est pas qu'il englobe tout, c'est qu'il vient de partout » (Foucault 1976, 75). C'est précisément dans cette toile, en perpétuel tissage et retissage, que le pouvoir se forme et se reproduit. Dans la troisième partie de cette thèse, j'ai exploré cette dimension « réticulaire » du pouvoir, en me focalisant sur la manière dont les processus d'hybridation des contextes sociaux et spatiaux, la resemiotization des pratiques sociales et la reconfiguration des subjectivités islam-orientées révèlent des dynamiques de réorganisation sociale alignées sur le discours normatif de l'exception marocaine. Ces tissages et ces entrelacements ne résultent pas d'impositions directes ou de campagnes explicites de propagande, mais émergent d'un processus organique lié à l'affirmation de soi des acteurs sociaux concernés. Dans ce cadre, le discours normatif n'est pas imposé de manière verticale, mais se construit à travers les interactions quotidiennes des acteurs, comme j'ai pu l'observer sur les pages Facebook des groupes islam-orientés.

En conclusion, pour saisir la complexité des rapports de pouvoir, il est essentiel de les analyser dans le contexte historique, social et culturel spécifique où ils prennent forme. Au Maroc, durant la période pandémique et post-pandémique, le va-et-vient constant entre les contextes online et offline par les acteurs sociaux a profondément influencé les modalités de construction de leurs subjectivités. Ces processus ne se réduisent pas à une simple alternance entre les dimensions physique et virtuelle, mais s'articulent dans des contextes hybrides où les

normes socio-culturelles locales interagissent avec les dynamiques propres à la sphère numérique. Cette hybridation ne doit pas être comprise comme un simple espace ou un outil, mais comme un processus socio-spatial complexe. À travers ce processus, les événements, comportements et discours se déploient dans un flux continu entre les deux dimensions, engendrant de nouvelles formes d'expérience de soi, de relations sociales, de pratiques culturelles, ainsi qu'à des modalités variées de participation collective et d'*agency* individuelle.

Toutefois, ce que je qualifie dans le titre des conclusions générales d'ère de l'hybridation ne peut être considéré comme un phénomène historique fixe ou immuable. Le retour dans les espaces en ligne islam-orientés après la fin de ma recherche a permis de constater que certaines bulles numériques, formées pendant la pandémie, avaient éclaté sous l'effet d'événements exogènes et endogènes aux groupes concernés. Ce constat revêt une importance particulière. D'une part, il confirme l'hypothèse centrale de ma recherche : les frontières entre les sphères physique et virtuelle sont en constante interaction, et ce qui se produit online est toujours en lien avec les dynamiques de l'offline. D'autre part, il met en lumière la multiplicité et l'immanence des rapports de force au sein des contextes dans lesquels ils se manifestent. Ainsi, la « toile de l'exception marocaine » ne peut être envisagée comme un produit achevé, mais plutôt comme une trame en perpétuel tissage. Les fils qui composent ce tissage proviennent toujours de la même laine (le système symbolique de la traditionalisation de la modernité), filée avec le même rouet (le cadre normatif de l'islam marocain). Cependant, les entrelacements historiques, sociaux et culturels s'y mêlent de manière fluide, donnant naissance à de nouvelles reconfigurations de la subjectivité et à une restructuration continue des relations de pouvoir au Maroc.

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APPENDIX

1. *Ethical Report*

Description of Risks, Corrective Measures, and Ethical Considerations in Research

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Introduction

As an Early Stage Researcher (ESR) of the H2020 MSCA-ITN “Mediating Islam in the Digital Age” (MIDA), I commit myself to respect and to accomplish with the ethical and research integrity principles and the international, EU and national laws. Firstly, I adhere to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, which implies to complete fundamental principles of: 1) Reliability in ensuring the quality of research reflected in the design, the methodology, the analysis and the use of resources; 2) Honesty in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting and communicating research in a transparent, fair and unbiased way; 3) Respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment; 4) Accountability for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organization, for training, supervision and mentoring, and for its wider impacts. Furthermore, as a member of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) and as a PhD candidate at the Universitat de Barcelona (UB), I carefully consider the CSIC’s and the UB’s Code of Good Scientific Practices. The principles of these Codes are: 1) to consider freedom and autonomy of research; 2) to protect the human dignity, particularly when human

beings are the targets of the research; 3) to take into account the acceptance of responsibilities towards society, during scientific activity; 4) to do research against human health or dignity including racism, holocaust denial or terrorism apology should not be supported, either in natural science or humanities; 5) to respect the principles of transparency in research. In the following sections, I will detail my commitments as an anthropologist taking part in the European Project MIDA, and conducting ethnographic fieldwork in contemporary Morocco, among Islamist individuals and groups.

Responsibility and Conduct

1—I'm committing to be open about the purposes, the potential impacts, and the sources of support for these projects with my colleagues, my interlocutors, and with relevant parties affected by the research. My research will be ethical, regardless of the source of funding or its purpose.

2—My primary ethical responsibility will be towards the people but also the natural environment. I will avoid harm or wrong, taking into account the impact of my research, and considering that it can lead to changes which may be positive or negative to the people and the environment. I will respect the well-being of the human (and non-human) beings.

3—I will consult my interlocutors towards their wish to remain anonymous or not, presenting them the possible impacts of their choices. I will actively try to obtain the informed consent of my interlocutors, even if it won't be necessarily a written document, but also by ways of dialogue and negotiation with them. Above all, it is the quality of the consent, not the format, which is relevant.

4—I will be responsible for the integrity of my work as well as the reputation of my discipline and institution. I will not exploit, deceive or knowingly misrepresent neither individuals nor the environment, and I will not attempt to prevent reporting of misconduct on both sides.

Application

1—My fieldwork activities will be conducted in a geo-political area traversing political, cultural and social frictions. I will pay particular attention to respect the cultural, religious and linguistic diversities and I will commit myself to respect the opinions of others.

2—Considering this territory (contemporary Morocco), I will not put in danger any individual or group through my research or my very presence.

3—Considering that my fieldwork activities will involve online surveys, I will ensure that my interlocutors are aware of the purpose of my research and I will inform them about their rights.

4—I will respect the principles of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality with all the material I will collect online. Even if the privacy terms of most social-media platforms allow one to collect and share any kind of content published, I will commit myself to hide or disguise identities, topics of discussions, photos and videos in order to protect the interlocutors, without falling into distortions or inaccuracies.

Dissemination

1—Considering that in anthropology a part of the knowledge is co-produced with the interlocutors, and that such knowledge is, most of the times, embodied and personal, I will not use this material (fieldnotes, recorded interviews, photo and video material) without taking into account the nature of that knowledge. It will remain private and not subject to dissemination.

2—I am the first responsible for the protection of my interlocutors, therefore, I will not diffuse, transfer, let access or give ownership rights of the data collected to others (i.e. employers, fellow researcher, or general public) without the consent of all the people involved.

3—I will try to implement the FAIR data principles:

Findable. Data and supplementary materials have sufficiently rich metadata and a unique and persistent identifier.

Accessible. Metadata and data are understandable to humans and machines. Data is deposited in a trusted repository.

Interoperable. Metadata use a formal, accessible, shared, and broadly applicable language for knowledge representation.

Reusable. Data and collections have a clear usage license and provide accurate information on provenance.

However, I will applicate these principles only if they do not contradict the statements previously mentioned in the sections I and II.

4—I am aware of the sensibility of certain material coming from my research and I will evaluate the impact of disseminating the data and their potential uses. For this reason, I reserve myself the right to maintain private all the information or data collected that I consider being sensible.

2. Methods of Assemblage Reflexivity

Methods employed, each with its specific objectives, to promote assemblage reflexivity.

Objectivation				Reflexivity			
Method	Participants	Steps	Goals	Method	Participants	Steps	Goals
Writing Techniques	Individual	Write the same scene, portrait, or chronicle observed in the field in different styles (journalistic, narrative, ethnographic...)	Understand the nuances of ethnographic writing to minimize overinterpretations of field observations	Video Making	Individual	Learn basic techniques of storytelling, videomaking, and video editing	Reflect on how to communicate and disseminate research findings.
Field Filming	Individual	Film challenging moments in the field, like that are difficult to transcribe instantly (i.e., events, ceremonies)	Gain perspective on personal experiences from field immersion. Notice details that may have initially escaped observation	Body Maps	Group/ Individual	After a short rest, draw the physical and emotional sensations in your body. Optionally, discuss these in a group. Repeat to track changes.	Acknowledge and externalize sensations and emotions without judgment. Observe changes and patterns, noting when and where they occur. Develop introspection through non-judgmental observation.
Reading-Writing Groups	Group	Organize reading and writing groups focused on online ethnography of Islam and (non)religious communities. Read, comment on, and discuss articles; review and critique each other's work; produce co-written texts	Reflect on the ethnographic experience and positioning. Discuss challenges of conducting qualitative research online. Produce shared knowledge and interdisciplinary research methods	Words Brainstorm	Group/ Individual	Write the first eight words that come to mind. Pair the first with the second, the third with the fourth, and so on. Write the new words from these pairs and repeat until only one word remains.	Reflect on and analyze feelings, thoughts, and patterns, and biases to stimulate consciousness.

3. *Data Management Plan*

Data Management Plan template provided by the MIDA project.

D9.1 Data Management Plan



Pascal Buresi, Fieke Schoots, Laurents Sesink

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Executive summary

This DMP is a general plan that applies to all research sub-projects in the MIDA project.

It is an elaboration of information stated in MIDA's Scientific Proposal, the paragraph on Open Access to Research Data in GRANT Agreement 813547 and the Consortium Agreement for MIDA. For all sub-projects, the Early Stage Researchers and their supervisors will write an individual DMP as a result of a data management training during the first MIDA training event on 1st November 2019 in Utrecht.

These data management plans will follow the general MIDA guidelines stated in this document. They will additionally contain details of the type of data collected or generated and how these are made FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Re-Useable)

Research data generated in the course of the MIDA project that is not restricted by law (GDPR, IPR) will be made available to the wider scientific community by publication in a data archive such as Zenodo at the end of the project.

Personal information about human individuals will be dealt with according to European and national legislation as specified in the MIDA Scientific proposal (paragraph 5.2 of the Grant.)

Further ethical issues related to research data will be dealt with in Work Package 10. In order to guarantee long-term access, research data will be stored as much as possible in sustainable formats and documented according to discipline specific standards and licenses.

1. Prepare

1.1 Data Collection

Within the MIDA project, a number of 15 Early Stage Researchers will collect and generate a variety of research data in order to answer the research questions raised in their individual projects.

They will collect existing data such as audiovisual materials, social media data, video clips, websites, digital collections, biographical database, (digital copies of) printed materials, manuscripts, drawings and photographs, reviews and news articles.

Furthermore, they will create interview data, survey data and video & audio-recordings. As the MIDA project deals partly with unsustainable and changing data sources from social media and the internet, dedicated training and internships will focus on how to secure access to these sources for research purposes.

At the end of the project, research data suitable for re-use will be archived in sustainable and interoperable data formats.

1.2 Data Documentation

When data is collected and stored in the course of the project, it will be documented according to community driven standards, if available.

Conventions on filenames, folder structures and information in readme files can help to guarantee understanding of the datasets on the long term.

For data archived at the end of the project, metadata will be added according to the standard used by the data repository (e.g. Dublin Core metadata).

All other documentation needed to understand and re-use the datasets will be stored together with the data.

2. Handling research Data-management

2.1 Data Storage and Back-up

To store and share data securely during the project, the researchers will use My Core Place, provided by the CNRS, as well as secure facilities provided by the host institutions (Beneficiaries).

My Core Space complies with the information security policy of CNRS and back-ups are made on a regular basis.

The researchers will ensure that back-up procedures are in place. If not, they will make regular back-up themselves.

They will comply with local information security policies and, if available, will ask for support from local support staff, privacy officers and the institutional Data Protection Officer.

2.2 Data Access and Security

Many of the data collected within the sub-projects contain personal or sensitive information.

As stated in the paragraph on Personal Data in MIDA's Scientific Proposal, personal data will be replaced with code names as soon as possible.

Keys to re-identify the data will be kept in a separate, secure storage space. Data will be anonymized whenever possible in relation to the research questions.

Participants will be asked for consent to share datasets within the network and access to these datasets will be organized accordingly. For this purpose, the CNRS provides My-Core, that enables encryption.

Consent forms will mention the option of eventual secondary use. If consent is not obtained for secondary use, data that can be traced back to individual persons will be destroyed after completion of the proposal.

Privacy officers at the host institutions will provide advice on local procedures in place for handling and processing personal data, in accordance with national and European law.

3. Preserve and Share

3.1 Data preservation and Archiving

Copyright protected materials and raw data that contain personal or sensitive data cannot be shared with the wider community.

These are kept for the purpose and the duration of the research project only.

Processed and anonymized datasets and all other datasets that cannot be tracked back to individuals will be achieved according to the FAIR guidelines, meaning that community standards are adopted as well as licenses that permit re-use.

The individual data management plans will provide more detail on how the FAIR principles will be applied to the subprojects.

3.2 Data Sharing and Reuse

Research data resulting from the MIDA project that can be of interest for the scientific community or the public will be made available for re-use via a repository such as Zenodo with a license that allows re-use and a reference to the ERC grant number.

The data repository will provide a persistent identifier to link to and cite the datasets in publications.

With the data, all documentation and, if applicable, software will be provided with the data in order to enable re-use.

Annex

ESR's Data Management Plan template*

The Research Data Management Regulations Leiden University requires researchers to write a data management plan at the start of a research project. Contact the Centre for Digital Scholarship at the University Libraries Leiden if you need help: cds@library.leidenuniv.nl. Please check for the latest version of this template at the website of the CDS.

* This template is based on the 3TU data management plan, the University of Bath data management plan and the Data Management Checklist of the University of Western Sydney.

ESR's Name and contact details	ESR 4 - Eleonora Landucci – e.landucci@imf.csic.es
Name of project and group	"Mediating Islam in the Digital Age" – WP 2 Languages and Translations
Research description	Online-Offline presence of Islam-oriented group in contemporary Morocco
Project duration	Start: 15-10-2019 End: Mid-Feb.-2023 (<i>expected</i>).
Names of people and their responsibilities for data management	Eleonora Landucci. Responsible for collecting, storing, documenting, and archiving the data.
Funding body(ies)	European Commission – Research Executive Agency
Grant number	H2020-MSCA-ITN MIDA 813547
Partner body	IMF-CSIC (Barcelona, Spain); GIGA Institute (Hamburg, Germany); IREMAM-CNRS (Aix-en-Provence, France).
Ethical review	See Ethical Report
Processing of Personal Data	<p>Personal data refers to any information that can be traced back to a person. This information could be a name, address, or location, but it could also be bank account numbers, telephone numbers or post codes with house numbers.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I do not collect personal data. <input checked="" type="radio"/> I collect personal data and I will answer questions P1 and P2.</p>
Part 1 – Research Data Processing Inventory	<p>You can contact the information manager of your faculty or the Data Protection Officer for the latest template of the Data Processing Inventory.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I did fill out the Data Processing Inventory and will attach it to this DMP <input type="radio"/> I did not yet fill out the Data Processing Inventory <input checked="" type="radio"/> Not applicable.</p>
Part 2 – Description of Risks	<p><input checked="" type="radio"/> I did perform a Description of Risks and Corrective Measures and will attach it to this DMP. <input type="radio"/> I have not yet filled out the Description of Risks and Corrective Measures. <input type="radio"/> Not applicable, I do not collect personal data.</p>

Annex

About this Data Management Plan

Date written 15-12-2019

Date last update 13-03-2022

Version A new version of the DMP should be created whenever important changes to the project occur due to inclusion of new data sets, changes in consortium policies or external factors.
Don't forget to include the date.

Changes in this version of the DataManagement Plan

Component	Progress / Execution
-----------	----------------------

Please describe briefly what progress you have made, any questions or issues you have encountered and want to discuss, etc.

1. Data collection

Qualitative data: interviews, audio and video recordings, fieldwork journals, archive material, photographs, drawings, screenshots, books, articles, reviews.
Quantitative data: statistical data, meta data from web scraping, social media data, Excel tables.

2. Data storage and back-up

Manual and automatic: External Hard disks, cloud platforms (UB platform and private platform).

3. Data documentation

Via software: Zotero, Tropy.

4. Data access, sharing, and reuse

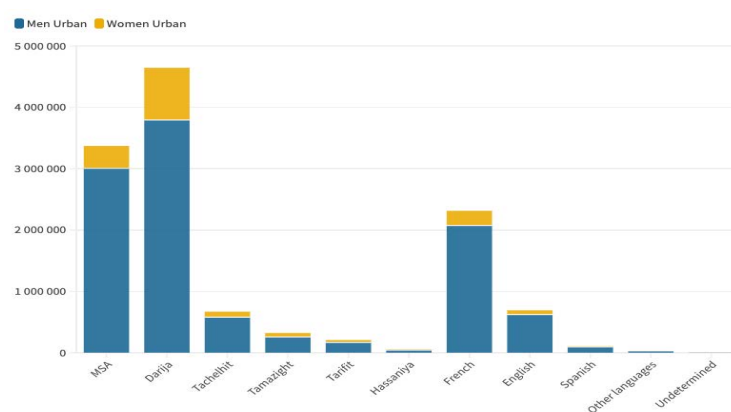
//

5. Data preservation and archiving

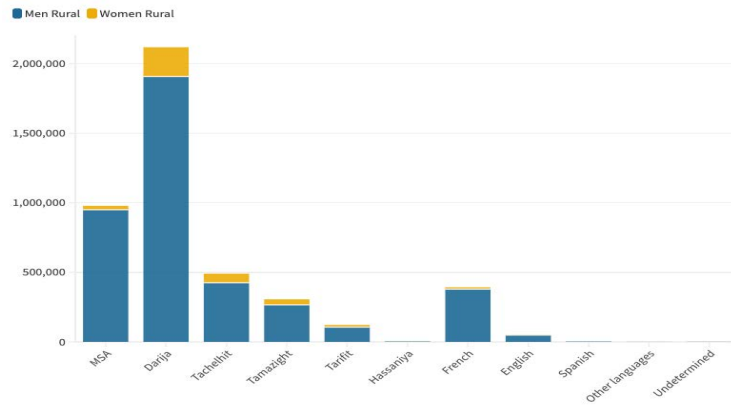
CNRS Repository (Zenodo)
University of Barcelona's repository (CRAI).

4. Language Uses in Morocco

Spoken, read, and written languages in Morocco, categorized by residence and gender.
 Source: Haut-commissariat au Plan. “Recensement Général de la Population et de l’Habitat de 2014”. Royaume du Maroc, Haut-commissariat au Plan, Direction de la Statistique, Division du Recensement de la population et de l’État civil, 2014.
https://www.hcp.ma/downloads/RGPH-2014_t17441.html.



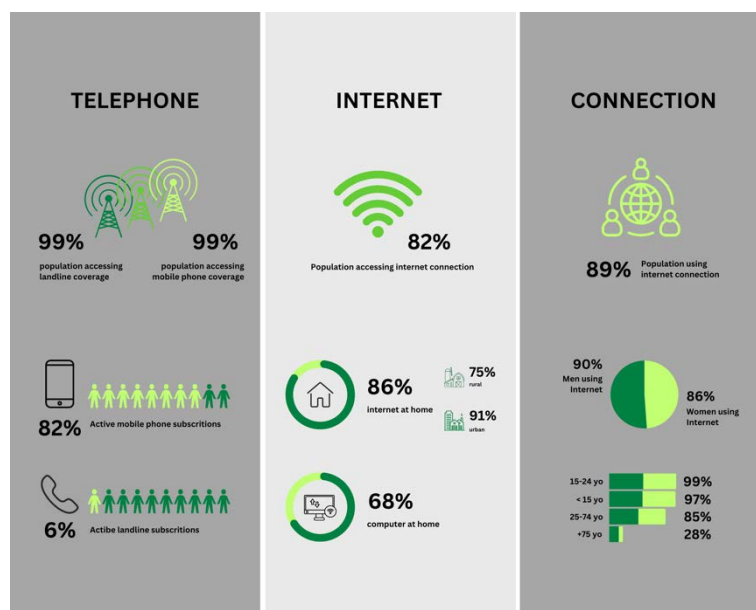
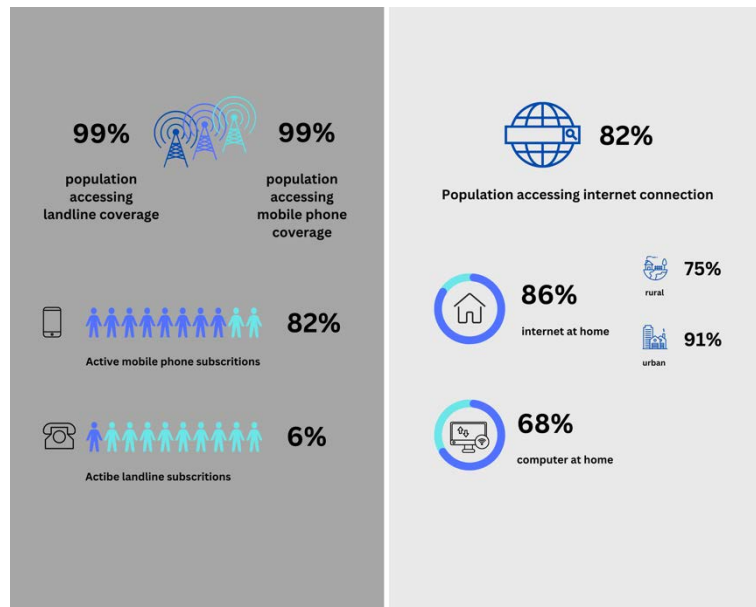
	MSA	Darija	Tachebit	Tamazight	Tarifit	Hassaniya	French	English	Spanish	Other Languages	Un determined
Men Urban	3 006 689	3 794 945	577 995	255 544	168 100	42 708	2 073 845	620 623	95 041	29 705	7 451
Women Urban	364 551	850 580	91 003	66 002	38 302	12 712	239 687	70 871	11 834	3 327	1 892



	MSA	Darija	Tachelhit	Tamazight	Tarifit	Hassaniya	French	English	Spanish	Other Languages	Not determined
Men Rural	949 521	1 907 911	424 693	265 895	105 873	6 872	378 966	48 597	6 505	1 978	2 921
Women Rural	29 094	210 970	65 977	40 455	15 753	1 190	13 425	3 126	332	127	147

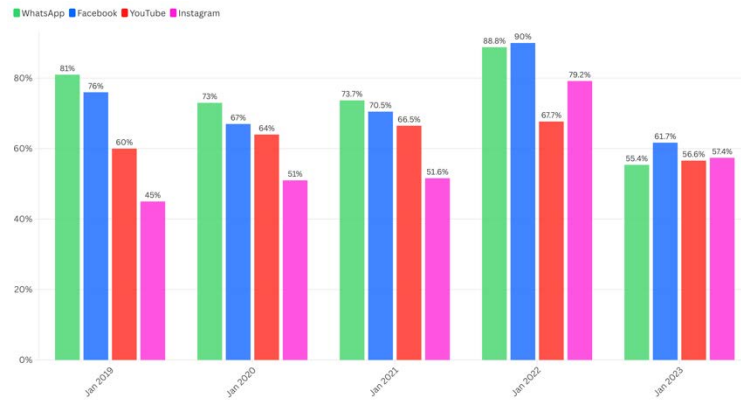
5. Telecommunications and Digital Media

Infrastructure, access, and utilization of telecommunications and digital media in Morocco in 2021. Source: International Telecommunication Union. “Measuring Digital Development. Facts and Figures 2021”. Geneva, Switzerland: International Telecommunication Union, Development Sector, 2021. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2021.pdf>.



6. Social Media Use

Social media use in Morocco between 2019 and 2023. Source: Annual reports from the DataReportal's website, <https://datareportal.com/digital-in-morocco>.



7. Overview Interlocutors

	Date	Pseudonym	Place	Affiliation	Tool
1.	20/03/2020	Meryam	Online	Al-Amal	Video call
2.	12/04/2020	Fatima	Online	OREMA	Video call
3.	21/09/2020	Brahim	Online	OREMA	Video call
4.	07/10/2020	Zeyneb	Online	OREMA	Video call
5.	15/11/2020	Issam	Online	OREMA	Video call
6.	13/03/2021	Hasna	Online	OREMA	Video call
7.	27/04/2021	Saddik	Online	Other (journalist)	Video-call
8.	05/09/2021	Fatima	Offline	OREMA	Face-to-face
9.	05/09/2021	Hasna	Offline	OREMA	Face-to-face
10.	12/09/2021	Hussein and Yusuf	Offline	OREMA	Face-to-face
11.	13/09/2021	Brahim	Offline	OREMA	Face-to-face
12.	03/02/2022	Meryam	Online	Al-Amal	Video call
13.	09/04/2022	Fatima	Offline	OREMA	Face-to-face
14.	25/04/2022	Meryam	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
15.	15/05/2022	Khaoula	Offline	Ulema	Face-to-face
16.	21/05/2022	Tariq	Offline	Ulema	Face-to-face
17.	23/05/2022	Tariq	Offline	Ulema	Face-to-face
18.	03/06/2022	Yasmina	Offline	Other (Biblioteca Daoudia)	Face-to-face
19.	04/06/2022	Farida	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
20.	13/06/2022	Aisha	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
21.	07/07/2022	Kenza	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
22.	19/07/2022	Abdelkader	Offline	Ulema	Face-to-face

23.	27/07/2022	Yousra	Offline	Ulema	Face-to-face
24.	21/08/2022	Kenza and Aisha	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
25.	23/08/2022	Oumaima	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
26.	12/09/2022	Latifa	Offline	Al-Amal	Face-to-face
27.	13/09/2022	Mohsine	Offline	Ulema	Face-to-face
28.	04/10/2022	Khaoula	Online	Ulema	Video call
29.	13/11/2022	Meryam and Loubna	Online	Al-Amal	Video call

8. *Semi-structured Questionnaire*

Semi-structured questionnaire aimed at individuals connected to Islam-oriented groups.

Group Structure

- Can you provide a brief description of your organization and its primary objectives?
- What are your main responsibilities within the organization?
- What is the main purpose of the association?
- When was the association founded? Was it founded in Tétouan or nationally?
- How many active members does the association currently have?
- Has this number changed over time?
- Do Islamic principles guide the activities of the association? If yes, how?
- Does the association have one or more physical locations? If yes, where?
- How is the association financed? Does the association receive public or private funding?

Ethics and Ideological Positioning

- Does the association follow moral precepts related to Islam? If so, which ones? How are these precepts put into practice?
- What do you think are the main obstacles facing Moroccan women in today's society?
- How does the association communicate with the local community to raise awareness of its activities and services offered?
- Have you ever considered expanding the association's presence on international online platforms to raise funds from a wider donor base?

Actions and Audience

- Which audience does the association primarily target?
- What are the main activities of the association?
- What are the busiest periods of the association?
- Do the association's activities change during Ramadan?
- What initiatives are planned by the association during Ramadan to support the local community?

Use of Offline Spaces

- What types of spaces does your organization use for its activities?
- How often do you hold events or meetings in these spaces?
- What are the main types of activities conducted in these spaces?
- How do you promote and organize these events?

Use of Online Spaces

- When did your organization start using online platforms, such as Facebook or YouTube, for its activities?
- Which online platforms does your organization primarily use?
- What were the primary reasons for this transition to online platforms?
- How do you utilize these platforms for your activities (e.g., live streaming of events, posting updates, interacting with members)?
- What are the main types of content you share online (e.g., videos, photos, text posts)?

User Engagement and Interaction

- How do you engage with your audience online?
- What strategies do you use to encourage interaction and participation from your members?
- How do you handle feedback and questions from your online audience?
- How do your members and the broader community perceive the use of online spaces for religious and community activities?
- Are there any concerns or reservations about using online platforms for these activities? If so, what are they?
- How do you balance the use of offline and online spaces to meet the needs of your community?

Communication Strategies

- What do your Facebook page and online activities represent to you?
- What are the main objectives of the association's communication strategy on social media?
- How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the association's presence on social media in engaging the community and raising funds?
- Are you currently actively seeking a new manager to handle the association's Facebook page?
- How does the association actively encourage women to participate and take on leadership roles within its activities?

- What is the main message that the association seeks to convey through its logo and organizational image?
- Do you believe that transmitting the ethical and moral values of Islam through the Internet can positively influence the local and global community?

Impact of the Pandemic

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your use of offline and online spaces?
- Did you increase your online activities during the pandemic? If so, how?
- What were the challenges and benefits of this increased online presence during the pandemic?
- Have you offered online activities during the pandemic?
- Have you noticed an increase in interest in your activities or a decrease? How?
- What initiatives or programs has the association implemented during the pandemic to continue providing support to the community?
- Have you changed any of your activities after the pandemic? Have you introduced new ones or eliminated any?
- Have you experienced a decrease or increase in your users after the pandemic?

Post-Pandemic Adjustments

- How has your use of offline and online spaces changed since the end of the lockdowns?
- Have you continued to use online platforms as frequently as during the pandemic?
- What are the reasons for any changes in your online activity post-pandemic?
- What are your future plans regarding the use of online platforms?
- Do you intend to increase, decrease, or maintain your current level of online activity?
- Are there any new platforms or technologies you plan to incorporate into your strategy?

9. *Semi-structured Questionnaire*

Semi-structured questionnaire targeting Facebook page administrators and users.

Introduction and Context

- Can you provide a brief description of your role within your organization and your main responsibilities?
- How long have you been managing the Facebook page for your organization, and how has your role evolved over time?
- Does the organization use other social media platform? If yes, which ones? Since when?

Goals and Strategies

- What are the main objectives of your Facebook page?
- How has your social media communication strategy changed in recent years?
- How did the pandemic influence your online communication strategy?

Content and Posting Frequency

- What is the current posting frequency on your Facebook page?
- What are the main themes covered in your posts?
- What types of content (photos, videos, live streams, etc.) generate the most engagement from users?

Use of Social-media Tools

- Can you describe the page's use of live videos/photos/infographics/hashtags/emoji?
- What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of these tools in the organization's activities?
- Can you elaborate on the internal discussions regarding the use of social media in your organization?

User Interaction

- How do you manage interactions with users on your page?
- How do you gather feedback from members and supporters of your organization?
- How do you moderate discussions in the page?

Challenges and Improvements

- What are the main challenges you face in managing the Facebook page?
- Are there any improvements or changes you plan to make to the page in the coming months?

10. *Structured Questionnaire*

Structured questionnaire directed to OREMA's online audience and submitted to 21 randomly selected users who had commented on live videos on the Facebook page.

Gender

Male

Female

Other

Age

Under 20 years

20-25 years

26-30 years

31-35 years

Over 35 years

Are you a student at the University of Tétouan?

Yes

No

Did you participate in the *ḥalqa* online (via Facebook live videos)?

Yes

No

If yes, how important do you consider the speaker's oratory skills during the *ḥalqa*?

Very important

Quite important

Slightly important

Not important at all

During the *ḥalqa*, did you have the opportunity to interact directly with the speakers?

Yes, frequently

Yes, occasionally

No, never

If you participated online, how did you interact with the speaker?

Real-time written comments

Emoji reactions

I did not interact

Which of these elements do you find most engaging during an offline *ḥalqa*? (Select all that apply)

Speaker's body language

Rhetoric and expressive techniques

Content of the speech

Interactions with the audience

Which of these elements do you find most engaging during an online *ḥalqa*? (Select all that apply)

Real-time written comments

Emoji reactions

Content of the video

Views and likes of the video

Do you think online *ḥalqa* has the same emotional and social impact as offline *ḥalqa*?

Yes, they have the same impact

No, the impact is lower

No, the impact is higher

I am not sure

How do you evaluate the importance of views and likes in online *ḥalqa* videos?

Very important

Quite important

Slightly important

Not important at all

How personally involved do you feel during an offline *ḥalqa* compared to an online *ḥalqa*?

Much more involved offline

More involved offline

Equally involved

More involved online

Much more involved online

To what extent do you think real-time written comments during the live session affect your attention compared to the speaker?

Significantly

Moderately

Slightly

Not at all

How often do you interact with other participants' comments during an online *ḥalqa* compared to how you would in an offline *ḥalqa*?

Much more often online

More often online

About the same

Less often online

Much less often online

Do you think the Facebook algorithm influences your participation in online *ḥalqa*?

Yes, a lot

Yes, somewhat

No, not at all

I don't know

Do you think online *ḥalqa* can reach a wider audience compared to offline *ḥalqa*?

Yes, definitely

Yes, probably

No, probably not

No, definitely not

In your opinion, what is the main advantage of offline *halqa*?

Greater direct interaction

Better understanding of body language

Greater emotional involvement

Other: _____

In your opinion, what is the main advantage of online *halqa*?

Accessibility from anywhere

Ability to review the content

Greater diversity of participants

Other: _____

Do you think offline and online *halqa* can coexist effectively in the future?

Yes, absolutely

Yes, to some extent

No, I prefer only offline

No, I prefer only online

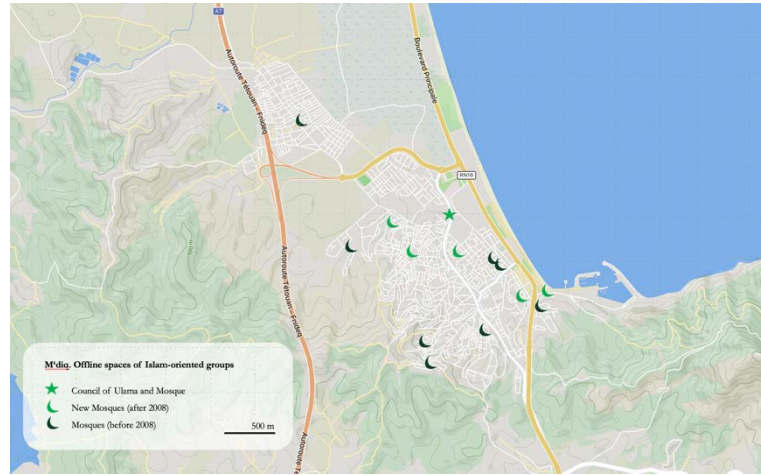
Do you have any additional comments or suggestions concerning online and offline *halqa*?

Yes: _____

No

Thank you for your participation!

12. The Ulema Council and the Mosques in M'diq



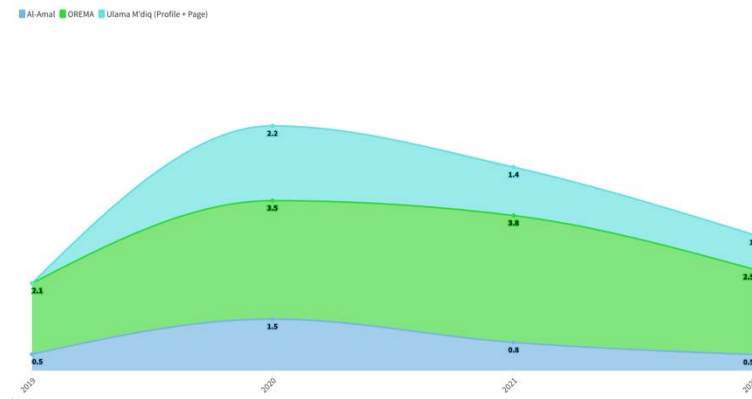
13. Thematic Content Categorization on Facebook

Sample table used for the coding analysis of thematic content categorization of Facebook posts. Posts were randomly selected for each group, with 4 posts per month over the period from January 2020 to December 2022 (144 posts per group, 432 posts in total).

Post ID	Date	Community Topic	Religious Topic	Political Topic	Text	Video	Live Video	Link	Emoji	Hashtag	Like > 20	Like < 20	Comment > 20	Comment < 20	Share > 20	Share < 20
01	07/01/2020	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
02	16/01/2020	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
03	22/01/2020	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
04	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

14. Daily Post Frequency

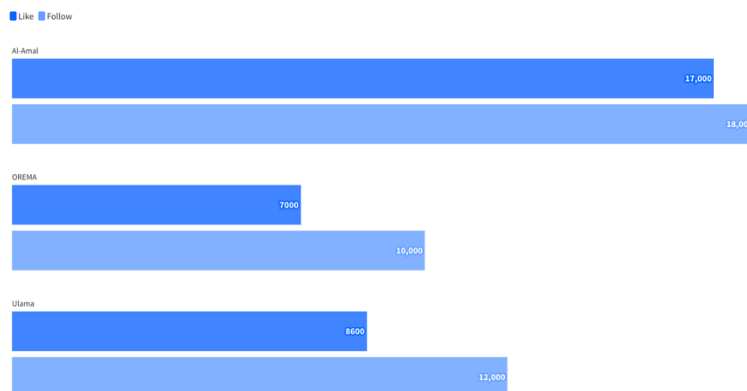
Daily post frequency of Islam-oriented Facebook pages from 2019 to 2022 calculated using manual web scraping and Python's NLP library DateTime.



Year	Al-Amal	OREMA	Ulema
2019	0.48	2.1	-
2020	1.52	3.5	2.21
2021	0.83	3.75	1.43
2022	0.47	2.52	0.9

15. Followers and Likes

Follower and Like statistics of Islam-oriented Facebook pages, as available on the platforms, with the last data access in December 2022.



Group	Like	Follow
Al-Amal	17 000	18 000
OREMA	7 000	10 000
Ulema	8 600	12 000

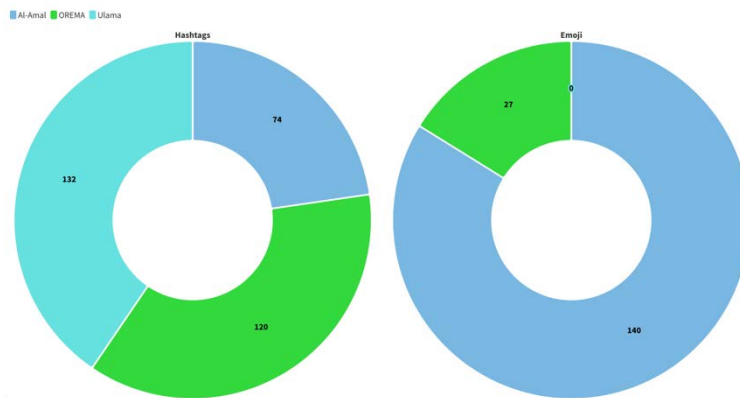
16. Language Uses in Facebook Posts

Differential use of MSA, MA, and other languages in posts on Islam-oriented Facebook pages from 2019 to 2022, calculated using manual web scraping and Python’s NLP library TextCat.



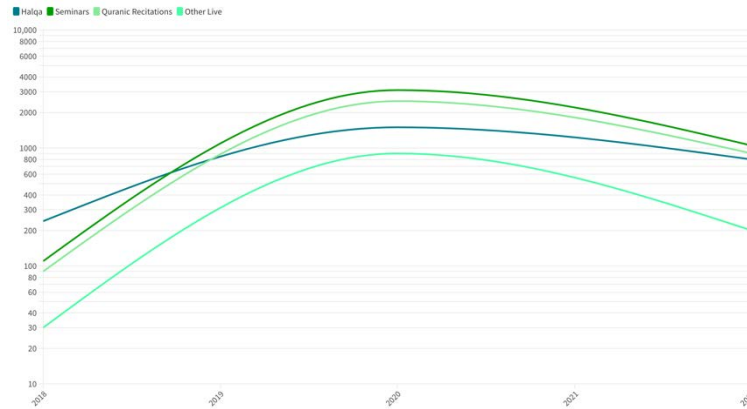
17. Uses of Hashtags and Emojis

Use of hashtags and emojis on Islam-oriented Facebook pages, based on the results of the coding analysis.



18. Views of OREMA's Live Videos

Weekly average views of live videos on OREMA's Facebook page in 2018, 2020, and 2021 calculated using manual web scraping and Python's NLP library DateTime.



Year	Halqa	Seminars	Q. Recitations	Others
2018	240	110	90	30
2020	1 500	3 100	2 500	850
2022	800	1 050	900	170

19. Al-Amal Funding Structure

System of international (at the top of the image), national (in the middle), and local (at the bottom) funding developed by Al Amal.

