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Authorized Loudness:

Tzaghrīta as a Matricultural System among Jebala Women

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Abstract

Tzaghrīta *(ululation) is frequently described in the literature as an affective, ritualized vocal practice expressing joy in life-cycle and communal contexts. Such framings, however, tend to leave unexamined the culturally specific conventions that shape the forms, contexts, and meanings of women's vocal presence in the public sphere.*

This article argues that among Jebala women in northern Morocco, tzaghrīta *functions matriculturally, organizing how women collectively express affect and negotiate propriety, authority, and public presence. Its expressive force depends on culturally specific forms of authorization that enable women's vocal loudness while also defining its limits.*

This argument is developed through an analysis of tzaghrīta *as it appears in Jebala life-cycle rituals, communal gatherings, and everyday social*

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interactions, drawing on ethnographic observation and historical accounts from the region. Particular attention is given to participation conventions, modes of circulation, and local moral vocabularies surrounding modesty, decorum, and vocal restraint. Situating tzaghrīta *within a localized matricultural framework reveals how women's voices acquire cultural force through established symbolic orders and how that force forms part of the broader organization of gendered social life in Jebala.*

Keywords: ululation, Jebala culture, women's voices, *tzaghrīta*, northern Morocco

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Résumé

La tzaghrīta *(ululation) est souvent décrite dans la littérature comme une pratique vocale ritualisée et empreinte d'affectivité, exprimant la joie lors d'événements liés au cycle de la vie ou à la vie communautaire. De tels cadres d'analyse ont toutefois tendance à laisser dans l'ombre les conventions culturelles spécifiques qui façonnent les formes, les contextes et les significations de la présence vocale des femmes dans l'espace public.*

Cet article soutient que, chez les femmes Jebala du nord du Maroc, la tzaghrīta *fonctionne selon une logique matriculturelle : elle organise la manière dont les femmes expriment collectivement leurs affects et négocient les normes de convenance, les rapports d'autorité et leur présence dans l'espace public. La force expressive de la* tzaghrīta *repose sur des formes d'autorisation propres à cette culture, qui rendent possible l'intensité vocale des femmes tout en en définissant les limites.*

Cette thèse est développée à travers une analyse de la tzaghrīta *telle qu'elle se manifeste dans les rituels liés au cycle de la vie, les rassemblements communautaires et les interactions sociales quotidiennes chez les Jebala, en s'appuyant sur des observations ethnographiques et des récits historiques propres à cette région. Une attention particulière est portée aux conventions de participation, aux modes de circulation de cette pratique, ainsi qu'aux vocabulaires moraux locaux liés à la modestie, au décorum et à la retenue vocale. Inscrire la* tzaghrīta *dans un cadre matriculturel localisé permet de comprendre comment les voix des femmes acquièrent une force culturelle au sein d'ordres symboliques établis, et comment cette force s'inscrit dans*

l'organisation plus large des rapports sociaux de genre dans la région des Jebala.

Mots-clés : ululation, culture Jebala, voix des femmes, *tzaghrīta*, nord du Maroc

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Introduction: *Tzaghrīta*, Loudness, and Matriculture

Ululation in the literature

Ululation—variously described across the Maghreb and Mashriq[1] as *tzaghrīta*, *zaghrūda*, *zaghlūṭa*, or *zaghārīd*[2]—refers to a high-pitched, trilling vocalization most commonly performed by women in ritual and public settings. The term derives from the Arabic verb *zaghrada* (زغرد), meaning 'to ululate,' with regional phonological variations reflecting dialectal morphology. Throughout Arabic-speaking societies, ululation is widely recognized as a gendered sonic practice, marked by rapid oscillation of pitch and sustained vocal vibration. It is typically embedded in moments of heightened collective significance, with its sound carrying strong cultural legibility: it announces transition, marks intensity, and signals communal acknowledgment. Though acoustically simple, the practice is socially dense, appearing in the course of life-cycle rituals, devotional gatherings, and public events.

[1] The terms *Maghreb* and *Mashriq* are used here as broad regional designations for the western and eastern parts, respectively, of the Arabic-speaking world. Both derive from Arabic geographical terms: *al-maghrib* (المغرب, 'the west' or 'place of sunset') and *al-mashriq* (المشرق, 'the east' or 'place of sunrise'). The variant English spellings—*Maghreb* for *Maghrib* and *Mashriq* for *Mashreq*—reflect established conventions in English-language scholarship, not differences in the corresponding Arabic forms. *Al-Maghrib* may also designate Morocco specifically, while 'the Maghreb' conventionally refers to the broader northwestern African region. I use these terms here in their regional sense and in preference to the broader designation 'Middle East,' while recognizing that neither constitutes a fixed or exhaustive geographical category.

[2] Jacobs cites Charles Pellat's 1952 article 'À propos des 'youyou' de la femme musulmane' in *Semitica*, which theorizes that "it seems more likely that the term '*zaghareet*' was first borrowed from *Tamazight* (Berber languages) during the Abbasid reign," with "its entry into the Arabic language deriving from the Maghreb region" (2008, 48). This interpretation, however, is not universally accepted. Traditional Arabic lexicography links *zaghrada* (زغرد) to the triliteral root gh–r–d (غ–ر–د), meaning 'to warble' or 'to trill,' suggesting an internal derivation *within* Arabic. During the French Protectorate (1912–1956), colonial officials and chroniclers referred to the sound as 'youyou'; it was reportedly banned during the Moroccan independence struggle (Baker 1998, 307).

Ethnographic and historical accounts have most often framed ululation as a sonic marker of celebration. In the Moroccan context, early European observers such as Edward Westermarck documented its prominence in life-cycle rituals, particularly weddings, where women's trills punctuate thresholds of transition and collective recognition. Subsequent scholarship published across the Maghreb and Mashriq has similarly situated ululation within festive contexts, emphasizing its role in expressing joy, marking auspicious occasions, and intensifying communal solidarity (see Nasrallah 1990; Ramadan 2009; Qissis-Nafl 2010; Adilah and Daraouiche 2012). In these studies, ululation appears primarily as an audible index of happiness, triumph, blessing, or ritual climax—a culturally patterned signal of collective affirmation.

Beyond celebratory ritual contexts, scholars have also examined ululation as a sonic register of resistance and collective struggle. In Palestinian and Algerian settings in particular, researchers have documented how women's ululations accompany demonstrations, funerals of martyrs, and moments of anti-colonial mobilization, transforming what might otherwise be coded as celebratory sound into an audible expression of defiance, endurance, and national solidarity (see Sambron 2008; Drif 2013; Abderrazaq 2015; Al Attari 2017; Saoudi 2018). In these contexts, ululation links private emotion to a public articulation of political belonging. Yet even here, the interpretive emphasis remains largely on what the sound conveys: grief, pride, steadfastness, national solidarity, and communal resolve.

Ululation has also been examined within broader discussions of gendered expressive culture, performance, and embodiment. Rather than treating it solely as an index of emotion or political allegiance, these analyses attend to the ways women's vocal practices are socially patterned, learned through participation, and embedded in regimes of decorum, modesty, and public presence (see Al Bakr 2014; Ramadan 2015). Ululation is thus approached as a form of embodied knowledge—one that circulates through imitation, repetition, and shared ritual experience outside formal instruction, in the traditional modality of oral transmission. Within this framework, the practice becomes legible as a gendered mode of participation in communal life, shaped by expectations surrounding women's comportment, audibility, and relational standing. Yet even here, the emphasis often remains on expression and identity—on what ululation reveals about gendered subjectivity—while the structural principles governing when and how it sounds remain less fully explored.

Within these varied contexts—ritual celebration, political struggle, and gendered expressive culture—ululation has most often been interpreted through an affective and semiotic framework. Whether sounding at weddings, martyrs' funerals, nationalist

demonstrations, or saintly pilgrimages, it is approached primarily as an expression of collective feeling or political meaning. Even when attention is paid to embodiment and performance, the analytic emphasis tends to fall on what ululation signifies: joy, grief, pride, defiance, blessing, or solidarity. What remains comparatively underexamined is not what ululation communicates, but how its sounding is organized—how timing, the layering of voices, initiation, and regulation render women's loudness culturally legible within specific moral and ritual orders. To address this lacuna, I approach ululation through the lens of matriculture, examining how patterned timing, aggregation—the layering of individual voices into a collective sound—and regulation structure women's audibility without collapsing it into individual display.

This analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the Jebala region of northern Morocco in 2022 and 2023, followed by repeated visits to the region. As an ethnomusicologist and a native of the Jebala region, this research forms part of my broader engagement with Jebala music culture and was supported by Columbia University and the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS). My research included participant observation at weddings, pilgrimage and devotional sites, and other communal settings in which *tzaghrīta* is performed, as well as engagement in conversations with Jebala women who participate in these practices. These ethnographic encounters provide the basis for examining *tzaghrīta* not only as a vocal form but as a socially organized practice understood and enacted by its practitioners.

The social organization of loudness

While existing scholarship richly documents the ritual centrality and affective force of *tzaghrīta*, it tends to foreground what ululation expresses, with less attention to how it becomes socially organized. Even when authors acknowledge that the practice has 'a time and place' (see Ensel 1999; Jones 2001; Jacobs 2007), this observation often remains at the level of description. The conditions under which women's loud vocality is socially embedded—who may perform it, at what moments, with what bodily comportment, and within what moral parameters—are noted in passing but have received comparatively limited theoretical attention.

'Loudness,' as used here, is an analytical rather than a vernacular category. My interlocutors did not consistently describe *tzaghrīta* through a specific Jebli Arabic term for loudness, nor did they discuss the practice primarily in terms of vocal volume. Instead, they described it through its social and ritual organization: when *tzaghrīta* is performed, who initiates it, how others join, and what its presence contributes to an occasion. My use of 'loudness' derives from the heightened audibility of the practice itself—its high-pitched

vocal production and the acoustic intensity generated when multiple voices sound together—and from the particular significance of such audibility within moral frameworks concerned with women's raised voices. I therefore use the term not as a translation of a singular local concept, but as an analytical description of this relationship between acoustic intensity and socially regulated audibility.

Previous research demonstrates that *tzaghrīta* operates within a dense field of ethical and cultural regulation. Discussions of propriety, modesty, and restraint recur in ethnographic accounts. Gestures such as covering the mouth while ululating are linked to decorum (see Jones 2001; Jacobs 2008; Meintjes 2019); interlocutors invoke notions of beauty and shame when describing the visible aspects of vocal production, particularly the exposure of the tongue during ululation (see Jacobs 2008); and juristic traditions at times classify women's raised voices as potentially problematic under certain interpretations of piety (see Jacobs 2008). Concepts such as *al-ḥayā'* (modesty), *ʿawra* (vulnerability or that which must be concealed), and the Moroccan vernacular *ḥshūma* (shame, impropriety) structure expectations regarding women's comportment in public space. Even where ululation is valued and expected, it remains bounded by moral vocabularies that govern when loudness is legitimate and when it risks crossing into impropriety.

Yet these regulatory dimensions are often treated as contextual background rather than as constitutive elements of the practice itself. Ululation appears as an expressive act occasionally constrained by norms, obscuring the extent to which its force depends on those very norms. The literature thus describes *tzaghrīta*'s affective meaning in detail, while the cultural system that renders certain forms of women's loudness intelligible, appropriate, and socially efficacious remains less fully explored.

Tzaghrīta *as a matricultural system*

To account for the patterned permissibility of women's loud vocality, this article approaches *tzaghrīta* through the lens of matriculture. Developed by Marie-Françoise Guédon and grounded in a Geertzian understanding of cultural systems, matriculture refers to the body of symbols and meanings pertaining to women and the feminine that operates in any given society as both a model of and a model for reality. As an analytic framework, matriculture provides a way of examining how symbolic systems position women, authorize their actions, and delimit their domains of influence across different social arrangements. It foregrounds women's symbolic formations as internally structured cultural systems in their own right, distinct from derivative models of male-defined authority.

Seen through this lens, *tzaghrīta* emerges as a matricultural form: a culturally sanctioned modality through which women's vocal presence becomes meaningful, legitimate, and effective. Its force derives from its operation within a symbolic order that designates specific contexts for women's loudness and establishes that loudness as expected. *Tzaghrīta* authorizes women's vocal intensity in circumscribed moments and delineates the boundaries of that authorization.

By reframing *tzaghrīta* as a matricultural system of authorized loudness, the focus shifts from what women express to how a cultural order structures their audibility. The question is not whether women 'find a voice' through ululation, but how a shared symbolic system renders certain forms of loudness socially legible, collectively affirmed, and morally intelligible within bounded social space.

Matriculture and Vocal Authority

Matriculture as analytic framework

Matriculture provides an analytic vocabulary for examining how symbolic systems position women within cultural life. It directs attention to the patterned meanings, expectations, and authorizations that attach to women and the feminine in any given society. The emphasis shifts from structural description to symbolic organization: how cultural forms render women's roles intelligible, legitimate, and consequential.

American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's formulation of culture provides the theoretical grounding for this approach. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973, 89). Symbols, in this account, both reflect and organize social reality. They operate simultaneously as 'models of' the world—rendering it intelligible—and as 'models for' conduct—shaping and prescribing social behaviour. A matricultural analysis therefore examines how gendered symbols function within this dual capacity: how they represent women's place in social life and how they prescribe the terms under which that place is enacted. This analysis draws on Guédon's articulation:

> We use the expression 'matricultural system' to designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal

> kinship system or not. A matricultural system may be minimal and derivative, or it may be considered the essential source of its cultural context… (2020, 6).

Ululation offers a useful illustration of how such symbolic systems operate across cultural contexts. In her study of Zulu vocal practice, Louise Meintjes explains the gendered and relational nature of ululation: "In the process of ululating, women are exhorting, competing, affirming, agreeing, celebrating, proclaiming, encouraging, anticipating, or praising, sharing in a mature women's world while marking their relationships to one another and to men" (2019, 64). Joel Kuipers' study of *pakallaka* (ululation) among the Weyewa in Indonesia reveals that this practice, grounded in local traditions of ancestor worship (1999, 494), incorporates dance and gesturing and may be observed in settings ranging from soccer matches to tombstone-dragging and not "in unplanned, informal, non-ritualized circumstances" (Ibid., 495). Ululation, then, is not spontaneous noise but culturally patterned action, activated at recognizable moments and embedded within shared expectations about women's participation in society.

Gendered vocal practices are sustained by symbolic systems that render them intelligible, expected, and, at times, obligatory. A matricultural approach therefore asks what such practices express and how they are authorized, structured, and delimited within broader cultural orders. The object of analysis is thus the symbolic organization of these practices, irrespective of the presence or absence of formal political power.

Why vocal practices matter

Vocal practices occupy a distinctive position within symbolic systems because they sit at the intersection of embodiment, audibility, and public presence. Unlike visual markers of gender, which may be constant or spatially contained, voice is ephemeral and expansive: it unfolds in time and carries beyond the body that produces it. It demands attention. As such, its regulation becomes particularly charged in contexts in which women's comportment and public visibility are culturally structured.

Tzaghrīta is deeply entrenched in everyday life in Morocco and throughout much of the Global South. Its performance is overwhelmingly gendered and communal, emerging within shared milieux of celebration and collective recognition. Jennifer Jacobs observes that

> the… contexts in which *zaġārīt*[3] is performed across the greater Middle East—weddings, births, baptisms, winning in sports, good news, payday, etc.—

[3] Direct quotations from the literature adhere to the authors' preferred spellings.

> speaks to its general reported function: expressing joy. And, indeed, the word my interlocutors most commonly used to explain *zaġārīt* is *faraḥ* "joy, exhilaration" (2007, 495).

This consistent association with joy reinforces ululation's place within culturally sanctioned domains of affirmation and ritual intensity.

This understanding was echoed by Rachida, a member of the groom's immediate family whom I met and spoke with during the 2022 wedding in Dshīra discussed below (see next section). She framed ululation explicitly within the domain of celebration:

> We just do it when we are happy… it's a way to express happiness. We do it in *mounassabāt* [special moments], we do it *afrāḥ* [joyous occasions] like weddings, when someone has a baby, we do it for *ḥinna*,[4] or someone comes back from the East.[5] This is what we do. In our tradition, the women either sing *ʿayyūʿ*[6] or do *tzaghrīta*. Singing *ʿayyūʿ* is difficult, it's not for everybody. *Tzaghrīta*—everybody can do that. To each her mouth and tongue…[7]

Rachida's account situates *tzaghrīta* firmly within the sphere of collective joy, but it also identifies an important distinction between ululation and other forms of women's vocal practice. Unlike the musical genre *ʿayyūʿ*, which she describes as requiring a specialized ability, *tzaghrīta* is available to everybody. Her phrase 'to each her mouth and tongue' locates this capacity in the body itself, emphasizing its availability without specialized musical expertise. In her account, then, *tzaghrīta* provides a broadly accessible means through which women can participate in and sonically mark collective occasions.

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[4] The *ḥinna* ceremony is a pre-wedding ritual held in the days preceding the marriage contract, typically as a women-centered gathering. The term refers to the reddish plant dye used for the hand-painting ritual during weddings; locally pronounced *ḥinna* in Jebala country—a marked phonetic distinction from *ḥənna* in much of the rest of Morocco. During the ceremony, henna is applied to the bride's hands and feet—often by an elder woman—symbolizing protection, fertility, and transition into married status. The event is accompanied by singing, rhythmic clapping, and sustained ululation, which collectively affirm the bride's incorporation into a new phase of social life.

[5] 'The East' refers colloquially to the *ḥajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam and an obligation for Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake it. The return of a pilgrim is marked by communal celebration, during which ululation signals honour, blessing, and the pilgrim's reintegration into local social life.

[6] The improvisational poetic form known as *ʿayyūʿ*, originating in rural settings—particularly within the domain of female singers—was "sung very loudly and was traditionally associated with the outdoors as a way to help pass the monotony of daily gendered tasks such as agricultural work and herding animals" (Curtis 2015, 325).

[7] Rachida [last name not known], informal conversation with author, July 16, 2022.

Yet scholars have also noted that ululation carries social force beyond mere affective signaling. In underscoring the potency of *tzaghrīta*, L. JaFran Jones writes: “It may simply be an expression of joy, but it is also an act of power. It would be most unfortunate for any significant event to pass without *zaghrīṭ*. Clearly women’s monopoly of this device enhances their status” (2001, 430). Jones’s formulation is important for recognizing the institutional weight ululation possesses within communal life. Significant events demand its sounding; its absence would be conspicuous. Women’s exclusive association with the form thus situates them as indispensable participants in the marking of collective transitions.

What emerges, then, is not a contradiction between joy and power, but their co-presence within a culturally structured domain. Ululation is simultaneously affective and authoritative. Its force derives not from defying norms of modesty or overturning gender hierarchies, but from operating within a symbolic system that assigns women specific auditory functions in moments of heightened social significance. Vocal authority, in this sense, is not an individual assertion but a distributed condition: a socially recognized capacity activated at recognizable times and governed by shared expectations. Approaching *tzaghrīta* through this lens allows us to ask not whether women gain power through voice, but how voice itself becomes a culturally organized site of legitimacy. Vocal practices matter because they render audible the boundaries of authorization—who may sound, when, and with what effect—and thereby illuminate the symbolic organization through which gendered presence is structured in public life.

Methodological positioning

My position as a male researcher from the Jebala region also shaped the conditions of my fieldwork. While linguistic and cultural familiarity afforded certain forms of access, my gender shaped that access differently among ethnographic settings. At weddings and other communal events, I was able to observe and hear *tzaghrīta* directly as part of the broader ritual setting. Other contexts, however, imposed gendered limits on observation. At the Cave of the Petrified Bride discussed below, for example, I remained outside while women entered the women-only interior. My account of that portion of the ritual—being unable to directly observe what occurred inside—is therefore necessarily grounded in what I could hear from beyond the threshold. Such differences in access form part of the conditions under which the ethnographic knowledge presented here was produced. My familiarity with Jebala culture therefore exists alongside the limits of my ethnographic position; these accounts are shaped by both cultural proximity and the gendered conditions of each setting.

Approaching *tzaghrīta* as matricultural does not *de facto* entail describing Jebala society as matriarchal, matrifocal, or unusually egalitarian. Nor does it position ululation as a hidden transcript of resistance or as a vehicle of empowerment in a progressivist sense. Matriculture, as employed here, is not a claim about social inversion or gender parity. It is an analytic orientation toward the symbolic systems through which women's roles are activated, delimited, and made meaningful.

Much of the scholarship on women's expressive practices in Muslim societies has productively explored resistance, subversion, and agency within constraint. These frameworks have illuminated important dynamics of power. Yet they can also incline analysis toward a binary in which women's vocal presence is interpreted either as repression or as defiance. Such binaries also risk reproducing what Lila Abu-Lughod critiques as the tendency to overexplain Muslim women's lives through culture, particularly when culture is imagined primarily as a source of constraint from which women must escape (2002, 783-88). This framing can obscure the historically and socially specific ways in which women inhabit, negotiate, and participate in the cultural worlds to which they belong.

A matricultural approach redirects attention from these interpretive frames to the cultural organization within which vocal acts are rendered legitimate in the first place. The central question concerns how norms themselves authorize specific forms of women's presence, including forms that do not depend on transgression for their efficacy.

This is a methodological shift, not an ideological one. It allows for the recognition that women's cultural centrality can coexist with bounded domains of action, and that symbolic authority need not entail structural dominance. By treating *tzaghrīta* as part of a system that concurrently enables and regulates women's audibility, its analysis avoids reducing loudness to either expressive excess or political insurgency. Instead, it examines how vocal authority is distributed, activated, and constrained within a shared moral order. Such positioning does not deny that ululation may take on political meanings in particular contexts. Here, however, the analysis brackets that question in order to examine the prior condition that makes such mobilizations intelligible: a culturally sustained understanding that women's voices matter in specific ways at specific times. Matriculture provides the vocabulary for analyzing that condition.

Contexts, Conventions, and Moral Regulation

Social contexts of *tzaghrīta*

Life-events and other rites of passage provide the primary contexts for the exercise of *tzaghrīta* in Jebala society. These ritual moments span the life cycle: birth, circumcision, naming of infants, the elaborate sequence of ceremonies marking marriage (from betrothal to the post-nuptial confirmation of the bride's virginity), and death. Within these settings, ululation does not appear as ambient sound but as a culturally expected acoustic marker of transition.

Its sounding punctuates specific thresholds—junctures at which relationships are reconfigured, statuses altered, or collective attention intensified. In wedding contexts especially, *tzaghrīta* marks departures and arrivals, public presentations and acknowledgments, functioning less as spontaneous expression than as structured affirmation. Women's voices rise collectively at recognizable points: when a bride leaves her natal household, when the dowry is displayed, when guests arrive, or when ritual sequences reach climactic points. These eruptions of sound are brief yet decisive, signalling that the event is unfolding as it should.

Several historical and contemporary ethnographic accounts—spanning nearly a century—illustrate the role of *tzaghrīta* in Moroccan marriage and naming rituals. In an early twentieth-century field report from Fès, Westermarck explains the sound of *tzaghrīta* as a "quivering noise" which occurs when a prospective bride's father returns to his home to share the news with his wife after conferring with the groom's father on the betrothal arrangements:

> The women of the house make a quivering noise, but the girl bashfully hides herself, not seeing her father for several days. Similarly, the young man's father tells his wife what has passed, and in his house also the women make the same kind of noise. But the lad himself keeps away from his father (1914, 22).

The customs followed by the Ulåd Bu-'Aziz of Dukkâla are linked to the rural milieu and indicate the nature of the entourage visiting the prospective bride's family:

> When the betrothal has been made, the parents of the young man, in company with the married women of the village, as well as male friends, take to the girl's family a present consisting of a sheep or bullock, wheat, and salt

> butter. When taking it there the women make their usual quivering noise, called *zġârīt*, which is also the name given to the present. After their arrival they grind the wheat, and while this is going on they again make their quivering noise, in which the other women who are present join (Ibid., 33).

Three ululations precede the suite of ritual wedding songs of the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountains, composed of the Indigenous genres *izwirrign* and *amarg*. The texts of these songs—a mixture of Arabic and Tashlhit, an Amazigh[8] dialect—begin with the opening phrase of the Qur'an, *bismi llāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm*[9] (In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful). The opening ululations are thus immediately linked to Islamic practice, reinforced by a song text which reads "I dress you as she was dressed/Aicha the Prophet's wife" (Rovsing Olsen 2013, 175-76).

Tzaghrīta is also a central element in Alessandra Ciucci's ethnographic account of a post-midnight rooftop wedding celebration in Safi at which both male and female guests are present and the *shikhāt*[10] (professional female singer-dancers performing the *'aita*[11] repertoire) are accompanied by male instrumentalists. In this excerpt, the guests react kinesthetically to the singers:

> As Hafida and 'Aicha [the lead vocalists] sang the lines of the poem, they took the audience into a journey where history, geography, lore, memory, imagination, and eroticism were recalled line after line….The guests listened attentively to the words as they gently rocked their heads and upper torso to and fro, waved their arms, clapped their hands, or ululated to incite the performers (Ciucci 2010, 74).[12]

In this vignette, *tzaghrīta* becomes woven into the performer/audience dynamic, in which audience response generates feedback to/from the singers; as Jacobs has observed in her

[8] Miriam Rovsing Olsen's discussion of Berber linguistic groups (2013, 166) hearkens to a term currently supplanted by 'Amazigh,' meaning 'free people' in the local language. The term 'Berber,' historically associated with the Greek and Latin terms for 'barbarian,' was in customary use during the colonial era (see note 2 above).

[9] باسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

[10] شيخات

[11] عيطة

[12] Yet the very qualities which are appreciated in the performance setting carry repercussions in terms of reputation. Kapchan explains this delicate balance vis-à-vis the attribute of *ḥashumi*, 'to be respectful and reserved' (from *ḥashama*, 'to defer'): "In order to dance, you must be *matluqa* [free, unrestricted], but in order to function in the hierarchy built upon respect for elders…you must be *ḥashumi*, careful not to shame yourself or your family" (1994, 94).

fieldwork, "*zaghareet* is characterized as both response to and motivation for feelings and affective behaviors by other social actors" (2008, 176).

In a ritual occurring later in the wedding cycle, following the consummation of the marriage, a bride's 'virtue'—evidenced by bleeding from the broken hymen—provides an occasion for *tzaghrīta*. The groom presents the bride's undergarments to women stationed outside the door, who would then "ululate with joy upon seeing the blood and either parade the bride's trousers through the crowd or hand them over to the men" (Combs-Schilling 1989, 207). The motif of blood also figures in the infant naming ceremony in Marrakech attended by Deborah Kapchan in 1999, at which a ram was "ritually slaughtered, its blood running down the blue and white hand-lain mosaic tiles to the drain," to the accompaniment of "sounds of joyous ululation" (2003, 265).

Beyond marriage and newborn rituals, ululation also appears in communal celebrations and returns—such as the homecoming of a pilgrim from Mecca or the public recognition of a family milestone—where audible affirmation is socially anticipated. Comparable patterned activation is documented in other Moroccan ritual contexts, including Jewish pilgrimage processions in Ouezzane, where ululation inaugurates the movement of pilgrims and dignitaries (Trevisan Semi 2009, 214). Even in funerary contexts, where affect may be more complex, ululation may mark passage rather than lament, distinguishing it from forms of wailing considered excessive or improper. On these varied occasions, *tzaghrīta* is tied less to generalized emotion than to socially recognized transitions that call for collective acknowledgment.

These contexts, however, are also bounded. *Tzaghrīta* does not circulate freely in the course of everyday interaction; it emerges within gatherings already designated as ceremonially charged. Its activation depends on shared recognition of the occasion's significance. Women's loudness is therefore situational, tied to specific times and settings in which their vocal presence is both permissible and expected. The recurrence of *tzaghrīta* at life-cycle events points to a central feature of matricultural ordering: women's loudness becomes culturally appropriate at occasions that call for collective affirmation.

Participation conventions

Within these ritual settings, *tzaghrīta* is not performed indiscriminately. Although multiple women may join in, initiation and participation follow recognizable conventions. The first ululation often emerges from a woman whose age, relational proximity, or social standing situates her as appropriate to the moment—an elder relative, a close kin member, or someone occupying a position of ceremonial responsibility. Others follow almost

immediately, overlapping in sound; the act is rarely solitary. Its authority derives in part from collective uptake.

Participation is structured by relational positioning. Younger women may join in, but they do not typically initiate in contexts where seniority carries symbolic weight. In some gatherings, unmarried girls, married women, and elder women participate with varying intensity, reflecting distinctions of age and status. The distribution of sound mirrors existing social hierarchies rather than dissolving them. Loudness, while communal, remains socially patterned.

Timing is equally regulated. Ululation does not erupt arbitrarily; it responds to specific cues—a bride stepping over a threshold, the visible presentation of a dowry, a musical cadence reaching its peak, or the completion of a ritual exchange. The first trill often functions as a signal that a socially charged moment has arrived. Others modulate their participation in response, producing a brief, layered swell of sound that rises sharply and subsides just as quickly. The resulting overlap is coordinated, with intensity and duration calibrated to the event's rhythm.

This patterned calibration was evident during a wedding I attended in July 2022 in the village of Dshīra. The occasion formed part of my fieldwork in the Jebala region, during which I was accompanying Lahcen Laaroussi Tanjaoui's ensemble in the course of a broader study of Jebli music traditions. After leaving Tangier, we followed National Road N2 until the Crochet Blanco intersection, where we turned toward Dar Chaoui and eventually left the paved road entirely. The final stretch consisted of roughly five kilometers of unpaved, winding ascent. The vehicle moved slowly over loose gravel and narrow bends, the climb taking close to twenty minutes. Only gradually did the settlement come into view: a small *dəwwār*[13] of five or six dwellings dispersed along the hillside and, above them, a large *caidal*[14] tent erected on a slight rise. Its carved wooden supports and scale distinguished it immediately from the surrounding homes, marking it as the ceremonial center.

[13] Term used in Morocco (interchangeably with *dshar*) to refer to a rural settlement or village. It usually consists of a cluster of houses, and is often surrounded by agricultural land or pastures. It represents a basic form of rural community, usually lacking formal administrative status.
[14] The term *caid* refers to a local administrator or tribal chief. Found throughout Morocco, *caidal* tents are used to honor distinguished guests and invited dignitaries, especially at national, religious, or family celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions.

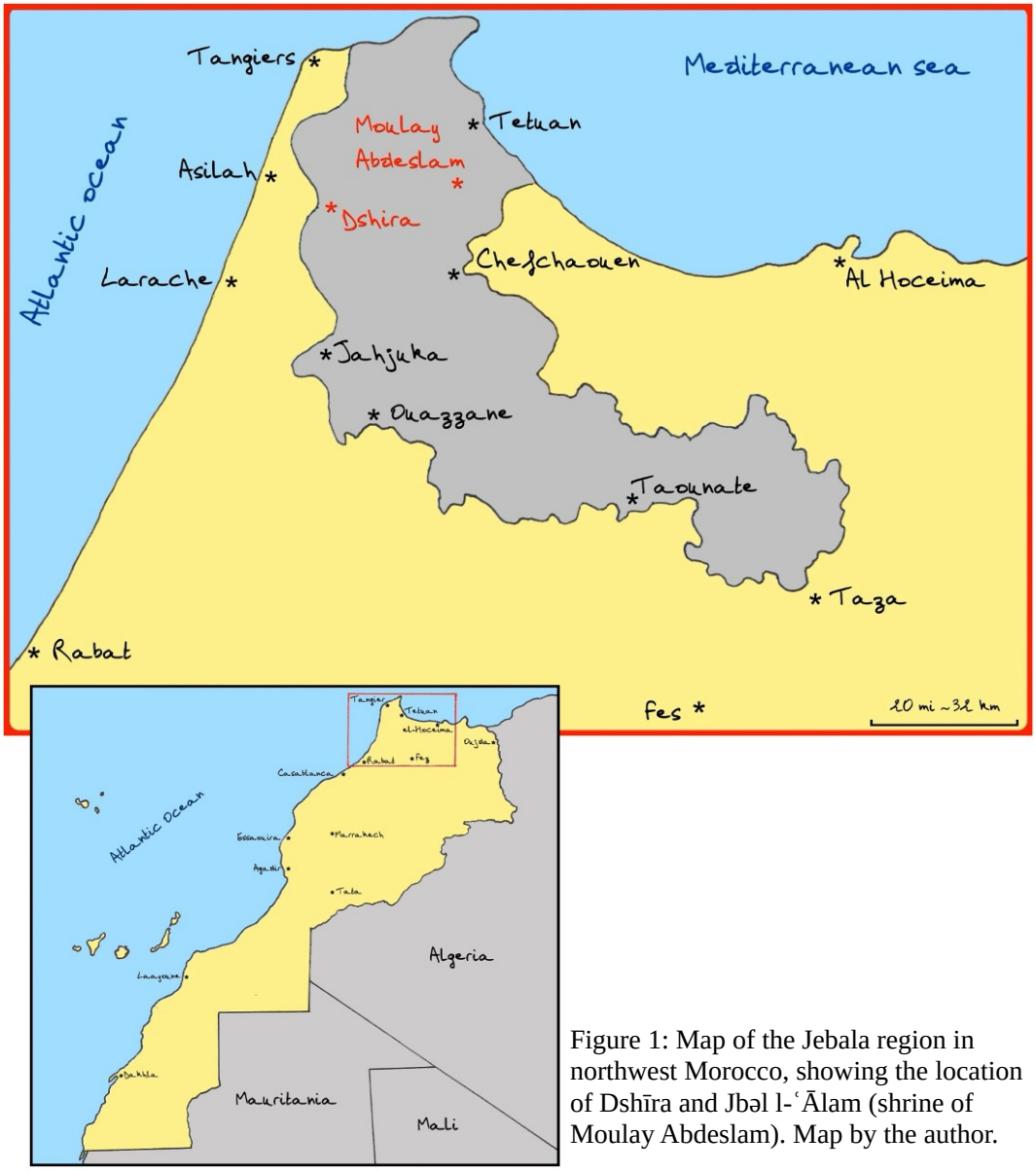

Figure 1: Map of the Jebala region in northwest Morocco, showing the location of Dshīra and Jbəl l-ʿĀlam (shrine of Moulay Abdeslam). Map by the author.

The afternoon temperature approached 99°F [approx. 37°C], though a steady wind cut across the slope. As chairs were unloaded and positioned beneath the tent, the distant sound of *ghayṭa* and *ṭbel* drifted upward from below the hill. The music grew steadily louder, signalling the approach of the bridal procession. At first glance, the group appeared fluid in its movement—men accompanying the musicians, women positioned toward the front, and children weaving between clusters. The bride progressed on

horseback within the procession, closely framed by women who surrounded her and structured her movement as the group ascended toward the village.

As the procession climbed, the incline grew steeper and the path narrowed into a corridor bordered by cacti, marking the entrance to the village. Here, at a point where mounted passage was no longer feasible, the group slowed and came to a coordinated halt. Several women stepped forward to assist the bride down from the horse. The musicians did not stop. The *ghayṭa* continued in short, insistent phrases, answered by vocal responses from the male players, producing a compact call-and-response exchange that structured the procession's ascent. It was during these brief musical intervals, when the reed instruments momentarily fell silent, that the *tzaghrītā*s would sound.

The first trill generally came from the elder women at the head of the procession, not from those directly beside the bride. It invariably came at the end of the very short chant of *əṣ-ṣlāt w-əs-slām*[15] initiated by several women, the ululation rising almost simultaneously with the chant's final syllable. The sound was sharp and sustained. Almost immediately, others followed—not in exact synchrony but in rapid succession—producing a cascading effect. Younger women joined fractionally after the elders, reinforcing the swell without extending it. No single voice remained distinct. The sound crested and then receded before the *ghayṭa* resumed its phrase. The ululation did not interrupt the music; it occupied the spaces within it. What was audible was not an individual voice asserting itself, but a coordinated layering of women's voices, activated at specific junctures and withdrawn just as deliberately.

From a distance, the scene might have appeared disorderly—wind, heat, music, movement, children weaving between groups. Up close, however, the vocal entries revealed an underlying structure. The ululations aligned with musical cadence and bodily transition. They marked the various thresholds—dismounting, entering the village, approaching the tent—without filling the air continuously.

This sequence illustrates how restraint operates as an integral component of the form. Extended or misplaced ululation risks disrupting the ceremonial flow and may be met with subtle correction—an elder's glance, a shift in musical direction, or the swift transition to the next ritual act. The efficacy of *tzaghrīta* lies in its brevity and placement. It punctuates

[15] This chant is widely recited by both women and men in Morocco during various celebrations, symbolizing deep respect and admiration for the Prophet and acknowledging his venerable status. The lyrics "*əṣ-ṣlāt w-əs-slām ʿlīk ā rasūl Allah. Lā jāh ilā jāh sīdnā Mohammed. Allah mʿa əj-jāh əl-ʿālī*" translate to "Blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah, there is no more noble standing than the one our Prophet Muḥammad, Allah is all supportive of his elevated status." In this context, *jāh* signifies honour, dignity, and the elevated position of the Prophet Muḥammad.

without saturating. Through this patterned alternation of sounding and silence, women's loudness becomes measured and intelligible, its intensity contained within the ceremonial flow.

These conventions reveal that *tzaghrīta* operates within a system of tacit knowledge. Over generations, women learn how to produce the sound, when to deploy it, and how to align it with collective expectation. Participation follows socially legible conventions of timing and context. Through such cues, coordination, and restraint, women's loudness takes shape as a culturally organized practice whose authority rests on recognition of proper form—and its predictable execution.

Moral vocabularies

While *tzaghrīta* is indispensable in designated ritual contexts, its legitimacy is not unconditional. Women's vocality in Muslim societies has long been subject to moral evaluation, framed within concepts that regulate bodily comportment, audibility, and public presence. Terms such as *al-ḥayā'* (modesty) and *ḥshūma* (impropriety or shame in Moroccan usage) articulate everyday norms of comportment, while the more charged concept of *ʿawra* (that which must be concealed or protected) anchors juridical and doctrinal debates regarding women's audibility. Together, these terms form part of a broader ethical vocabulary through which women's verbal expression, appearance, and behaviour are assessed.

These forms of regulation, however, cannot be attributed solely to Islamic ethical discourse or local cultural norms. Colonial rule introduced its own regimes for regulating women's public presence and expressive practices, often through colonialist constructions of morality and public order. In Morocco, this extended to the practice of *tzaghrīta* itself: during the French Protectorate, the *youyou*, as colonial authorities termed it, was reportedly prohibited during the independence struggle due to its potency (Baker 1998, 307). Women's audibility was thus shaped by overlapping moral, political, and historical regimes of regulation.

Within the ethical register, as Saba Mahmood notes, *al-ḥayā'*[16] (حياء) denotes a cultivated disposition of modesty valued among pious Muslims (2005, 156; see also Esposito 2004). Such ethical concepts structure comportment through normative ideals as well as

[16] *Al-ḥayā'* (Arabic: حياء) is commonly translated as modesty, shyness, or moral reserve. In Islamic ethical discourse, it refers to a cultivated disposition of restraint grounded in awareness of divine and social accountability. Unlike purely prohibitive notions of shame, *al-ḥayā'* is often framed as a positive virtue—an interiorized moral sensibility shaping comportment, speech, and interaction. Interpretations of its scope and gendered implications vary across legal, theological, and cultural contexts.

prohibitions. In Moroccan vernacular usage, the admonition *ḥshūma!*[17] (حشومة) marks a transgression of propriety—signaling that a boundary of acceptable conduct has been crossed (see Ossman 1994, 155-56). Debates surrounding veiling likewise underscore that modesty may be interpreted as ethical discipline rather than mere constraint (see Afsaruddin 1999, 7-9).

Legal discourse provides one expression of this regulatory field. The thirteenth-century jurist Ibn al-Hajj denounced female Sufi leaders who performed *dhikr*[18] publicly, regarding such practices as illegitimate on the grounds that women's voices constitute *ʿawra*[19] and therefore should not be heard in mixed company (Ahmed 1992, 116). Frances Hasso and Zakia Salime similarly cite the widely circulated formulation *ṣawt al-mar'a ʿawra* (a woman's voice is ʿawra), a phrase that expresses an equivalence between women's voices and sexualized body parts (2016, 16). Within this interpretation, women's audibility in the presence of unrelated men becomes morally suspect rather than socially neutral.
These formulations, however, represent one strand within a broader ethical discourse. Modesty can function as both cultivated virtue and prohibition, structuring comportment without mandating silence.

Leila Ahmed explains that the semantic range of *ʿawra* has been historically entangled with anatomical references:

> ʿAwra is one of those words… richly suggestive of the androcentrism of dominant Arabic culture and of the connections it made between women, sexuality, and shameful and defective things. Its meaning includes blind in one eye; blemished, defective; the genitals; generally parts of the body that are shameful and must be concealed; women's bodies; women's voices; and women (Ahmed 1992, 116).

[17] *Ḥshūma* (Moroccan Arabic: حشومة) derives from the root ḥ-sh-m, associated with shyness and modest restraint. In Moroccan vernacular usage, the term functions as both noun and exclamation, denoting impropriety, embarrassment, or behavior deemed socially inappropriate. Beyond individual feeling, *ḥshūma* operates as a moral boundary marker within everyday interactions, signalling that a norm of decorum, respect, or social propriety has been breached. Its force is situational and relational rather than juridical, reflecting community-based expectations of appropriate conduct.

[18] *Dhikr* (Arabic: ذكر), meaning 'remembrance,' refers to devotional practices centered on the repetition of divine names, Qur'anic phrases, or invocations of God. In Sufi contexts, *dhikr* may be performed individually or collectively and can include rhythmic chanting, breath control, bodily movement, or musical accompaniment.

[19] *ʿAwra* (Arabic: عورة) denotes that which must be concealed or protected. In Islamic legal and ethical discourse, the term refers to parts of the body that should remain covered, though its semantic range extends beyond anatomical reference to include notions of vulnerability, modesty, and moral exposure. Interpretations of what constitutes *ʿawra* vary across legal schools and cultural contexts.

Margot Badran similarly describes the ideological framing in which:

> Women's voices were considered awra, something shameful, to be covered. Awra, which means pudendum, carries specifically sexual connotations. Moreover, not only women's voices but their entire beings were construed in sexual terms and therefore as awra. The prevailing ideology held that women, as essentially sexual beings, posed dangers to men, family, and society. Men secluded women in order to control them—that is, women of the middle and upper classes… whose labor outside the home was not needed. Their lives were to be private and unseen (2009, 96–97).

These formulations underscore the degree to which women's audibility has been morally charged in certain historical and doctrinal articulations. Female vocal presence is not culturally neutral; it is situated within discourses of propriety, sexuality, and social order. Yet such discourses do not translate into uniform silence. The same cultural milieu that produces arguments for restricting women's public voices simultaneously sustains ritual practices in which female ululation is expected and, as Remo Ensel notes, "cannot be left out" (1999, 231).[20] Ritual context alone, however, does not necessarily authorize ululation. At the conclusion of the *hajj*[21], for example, it may be regarded as inappropriate or unwelcome; Jacobs notes that "women who perform *zaghareet* upon their husbands' completion of the *hajj* thereby invalidat[e] the act" (2008, 163). The distinction, therefore, is not between ritual and nonritual settings, nor between prohibition and permission in absolute terms, but between contexts in which loudness is fitting and those in which it breaches commonly held expectations of restraint.

Moral vocabulary and ritual conventions thus operate in tandem. Covering the mouth while ululating, limiting duration, and aligning the sound with ceremonial rhythm become not incidental gestures but embodied signs of calibration, documented across ethnographic accounts. Jones, for instance, notes that, in Maghrebi culture, "the right hand is extended horizontally over the upper lip" during *tzaghrīta* (2001, 429); Meintjes draws a connection between the practice of ululation and proper behaviour in noting that women "partially cover their mouths decorously when they ululate" (2019, 63). Jacobs observed Jordanian females adopting the practice of placing one's hand over the mouth during *tzaghrīta*, citing a dual concern—with about half of the women surveyed stating

[20] British orientalist Edward Lane similarly documented women's ululation at the funeral of "a devout sheykh" in mid-nineteenth-century Egypt, noting that the women "rend[ed] the air with the shrill and quavering cries of joy called 'zagháreet'" that accompanied the procession (1871, 259).

[21] *Ḥajj* is the major pilgrimage to Mecca required once in a lifetime for able-bodied Muslims. The conclusion of the pilgrimage is marked by ritual acts emphasizing humility, supplication, and restraint—contexts in which exuberant vocal display may be considered inappropriate in some interpretations.

that this gesture helps “to focus the sound outward” (2008, 140), and the other half cognizant of the visual impact of the tongue “lolling about in plain view.” This image, Jacobs comments, “seemed crude to many” (Ibid., 141); one woman used the phrase *mish hilw*[22] (not pretty). Jacobs concludes that “masking such an unpleasant view is consistent with concerns about polite, modest social behavior in the region” (Ibid.).



Figure 2: A woman performing tzaghrīta *(ululation) among a gathering of women in Dəwwār Būnṭāyər, in the territory of the Lakhmās tribe, southeast of Chefchaouen, northern Morocco, June 2019. © Abdou El Ouahabi, used with permission.*

Loudness, on the other hand, is activated without necessarily dissolving modesty; intensity coexists with decorum—despite Jacobs’ caution that some of her Muslim interlocutors stated that *zaghareet* is *ḥarām*, i.e. forbidden, according to an unspecified *ḥadīth* from the body of traditional sayings of the Prophet specifying that “women should not raise their voices above men’s” (2008, 163). In this configuration, *tzaghrīta* operates within the ethical ideals of *al-ḥayā’* and the sensitivities surrounding *ʿawra*, its audibility enhancing communal order in some contexts and unsettling it in others.

[22] مش حلو

Authorization, however, is never absolute. The same symbolic order that activates women's loudness at particular thresholds simultaneously defines its limits. Authorization is temporal, situational, and relational: it attaches to moments, not to persons. A woman who may sound forcefully within a wedding procession does not thereby acquire unrestricted vocal license in other domains. The legitimacy of *tzaghrīta* depends on the circumstances under which it sounds. When those conditions shift, the act risks reclassification—from affirmation to impropriety. The power of the practice thus lies not in escaping regulation but in operating precisely at its edge. *Tzaghrīta* exemplifies a form of vocal authority that is both enabled and delimited by the matricultural order.

Collective Voicing and Authorized Loudness

Tzaghrīta *as collective utterance*

Tzaghrīta is rarely a solitary act. Although an individual woman may initiate the first trill, the sound almost immediately becomes collective. Others join, overlap, and sustain the layered resonance, producing simultaneity rather than sequence as the initial trill disperses among participants. The result is a shared acoustic event. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea recounts her experience in Marrakech in the early 1970s while watching a neighbourhood prenuptial procession, noting the infectious character of these utterances:

> "Ah…ooooooh!" The woman closest to us started the tzaghreet, that high, ululating women's wail that can be joyful or sad, depending on the occasion, but that now came forth like a cry of triumph from Rue Trésor. It was taken up by other women, in the house, at the windows above the street, and from the sibha [covered passageway], where a crowd of relatives stood to get a last glimpse of the dowry, Rabia's household goods, making its formal way from her natal house to her nuptial house, to establish a new family unit. Ululations sounded from the rooftops along the street…. (1975, 130).

Fernea's account captures the contagious and spatially expansive character of the form. This vocal simultaneity has important implications. Because multiple voices sound together, the act resists identifiable attribution. No single performer remains acoustically foregrounded for long; the sound blends, layers, and disperses. Even when initiated by a particular woman, her ululation becomes indistinguishable from the collective response that follows. The voice is heard, yet its individual source is absorbed within the collective sound.

Such dissolution is not incidental but structurally embedded in the form itself. The rapid oscillation of pitch, the high timbral intensity, and the overlapping entries produce a sonic field in which individual vocal signatures are difficult to isolate. Unlike speech or solo song, which may highlight a named performer, *tzaghrīta* privileges simultaneity over individuation. The sound marks presence without attributing authorship.

Through this collective voicing, vocal agency becomes distributed: multiple women co-produce a coordinated acoustic surge whose force lies in its density and coordination. This participation gives the act its authority, diminishing the significance of personal charisma or verbal content. At a ritual threshold, the resulting burst signals communal affirmation. The act is effective precisely because it is shared, as Rachida explained when I asked who may initiate the *tzaghrīta*:

> Everybody can start it… but we all know who is going to do it first. In every family, in every village, the ones who step in are well known—the *zʿāymiyya*[23] [bold initiators]—… But it depends on the occasion. For a *sbūʿ*,[24] it will probably be the grandmother, or the elder sister of the woman who gave birth… A youngster might start in some moments, but not in others.

Rachida's explanation underscores a productive tension: participation is widely accessible, yet initiation is socially legible. Her use of the term *zʿāymiyya* is particularly revealing: although anyone may technically initiate, certain women are recognized as those who characteristically step forward, and their capacity to do so varies with the occasion and their relational standing within it. Openness, then, does not imply randomness; accessibility does not eliminate hierarchy. Initiation emerges from a form of social knowledge shared among the women themselves.

This distribution of agency mitigates the risks typically associated with women's public loudness. In contexts where female vocal display may otherwise attract scrutiny, collective

[23] The term *zʿāymiyya* derives from *zaʿīm* (leader) and connotes someone who steps forward with confidence or recognized authority. In this context, it does not refer to formal leadership but to a socially acknowledged readiness to initiate collective action, especially in ritual settings.

[24] Held on the seventh day after a child's birth, the *sbūʿ* is a significant event in Moroccan culture, as it marks the newborn's presentation to the community. Family members and friends gather at the baby's family home for a party, and a sheep (or a goat) is typically slaughtered, symbolizing gratitude and seeking blessings for the newborn's health and prosperity. Traditionally, this ceremony involved the selection of a name for the child. However, nowadays the child usually already has a name, making the ceremony largely symbolic. Guests bring gifts, usually clothing or practical items for the family, and the gathering takes on a distinctly festive character. Music, rhythmic chanting, and women's ululations punctuate the celebration, marking the child's incorporation into communal life and affirming collective joy.

sounding diffuses exposure. Recognition is achieved without singling out an individual performer. Audibility is intensified while responsibility remains communal. The sound is unmistakably present, yet it does not belong to any one woman.

Seen in this light, *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a matricultural mechanism of collective voicing. Its force comes from the coordinated production of shared audibility, through which loudness becomes a property of the group. This structured simultaneity allows *tzaghrīta* to generate social presence within established moral boundaries.

Loudness without individuation

The collective structure of *tzaghrīta* produces a distinctive configuration of audibility: loudness without individuation. Although the sound is piercing and unmistakable, it does not attach itself to a singular subject. Recognition occurs at the level of the group. What is acknowledged is not *who* sounded, but *that* the women have sounded.

This distinction matters. In many social contexts, heightened vocal presence risks drawing attention to the speaker as a discrete actor. Public loudness may expose an individual to scrutiny, moral evaluation, or reputational consequence. *Tzaghrīta*, however, diffuses that exposure through aggregation. Because the sound is layered and simultaneous, it resists attribution. No one woman stands alone as the source; the acoustic event belongs to the collectivity.

A different configuration of this diffusion was evident at a cave site in the Jebala region known locally as *Kahf ləʿrūsa l-məmsūkha* [Cave of the Petrified Bride], associated with a legend of a bride who fled an unwanted marriage and was transformed into stone. The cave lies in the immediate vicinity of Moulay Abdeslam's shrine at Jbəl l-ʿĀlam, a site of enduring importance in Jebala religious and social life. The saint—widely regarded as a spiritual patron of the region—anchors an annual pilgrimage (*mūssem*) that draws visitors from throughout northern Morocco. His presence structures local sacred geography, linking dispersed villages through shared devotional itineraries. The legend of the petrified bride and the ritual practices surrounding the cave thus unfold within a landscape already marked by saintly authority and pilgrimage movement. Women's collective ululation at the cave resonates within this broader devotional terrain—where supplication, blessing, and embodied presence are woven into the rhythms of Jebala ritual life.

Women from surrounding villages—and increasingly from nearby towns—visit the site seeking blessing in matters of marriage. Young unmarried women in particular come in

groups, hoping for a husband in the near future, with married women accompanying them; sometimes out of curiosity, just for fun, or as ritual facilitators.

The entrance to the cave is narrow. Despite its constriction, clusters of young women gather there, waiting their turn to enter. Around the mouth of the cave and along its interior walls hang fragments of women's undergarments—left behind, according to local practice, after supplication. Some garments remain draped across the rocks; others lie scattered near the entrance. The gesture is linked to the legend: a young bride, forced toward a marriage she refused, fled on her wedding day and wept inside the cave until she was petrified. The droplets of water that continue to fall from the inner rock are said to be her tears. Young women touch the stone, wash their faces with the water believed to flow from it, and leave behind a token of clothing in hopes that their own marriages will be secured.

As groups approach the entrance, the phrase *əṣ-ṣlāt w-əs-slām ʿlīk ā rasūl Allah* (Blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah) is repeated aloud. The chant circulates among them before they enter, resembling a collective invocation. Once inside, the girls can be heard ululating and repeating blessings upon the Prophet. The sound thickens immediately within the enclosed space. From outside the cave entrance, I could hear the shift without seeing the participants; the interior is treated as a women-only space, and so my position remained just beyond the threshold. What registered was not individual movement but acoustic density.

At the close of each short chant, ululation erupted—not from a single discernible source, but from multiple voices entering almost simultaneously. The cave's stone walls compressed and magnified the sound, folding each trill into the next. What may have begun as an individual voice became almost instantly indistinguishable within the layered resonance. From outside, attribution became impossible. I could distinguish proximity—voices nearer the entrance sounded sharper, while those deeper within echoed with softened reverberation—but could not identify an initiator because the oscillations overlapped too quickly. Each entry masked the previous one.

Occasionally the chant would pause. Then another surge would break forth, again indistinguishable in origin. No voice lingered long enough to separate itself from the group. What was audible was not an individual plea for marriage but a shared sonic gesture enacted in simultaneity. The acoustic field belonged to the collectivity.

The result is a form of presence that is both amplified and shielded. The sound carries force—it punctuates ritual thresholds, commands attention, and affirms communal

transitions—yet it does so without isolating a performer. Women are publicly audible, yet not publicly singularized. The act affirms participation without converting participation into self-display.

Rhimou, a backup singer in Lahcen's ensemble whom I came to know while shadowing the group during fieldwork, articulated this distinction by contrasting village practice with urban weddings:

> In Tangiers, in Larache… in the city, in general… they bring a *nəggāfa*[25] and the women who accompany her; they are responsible for everything. One of these women is in charge of the *tzaghrīta*. The *nəggāfa* handles the clothing and jewelry, and the others help the bride with the *caftan* [traditional Moroccan gown] as she walks. But one of them is there just for the *tzaghrīta*—she's the one everything relies on. And it's you and your *ghrāma* [monetary tip]—the bigger the *ghrāma*, the more she'll stretch her throat. For us, no… we do everything ourselves… we do the *tzaghrīta* ourselves. Maybe a woman will help with clothing—but that's family. For the *tzaghrīta*? *Abadan* [never]. Our own women do it.[26]

Her contrast underscores more than a simple rural/urban difference. Rhimou distinguishes between two ways of organizing *tzaghrīta*. In the urban weddings she describes, responsibility for ululation is assigned to a designated performer and incorporated into the paid services surrounding the bride; as Rhimou puts it, "the bigger the *ghrāma*, the more she'll stretch her throat." By contrast, her repeated insistence that "we do everything ourselves" and that "our own women do it" locates *tzaghrīta* within the participating community itself. Her emphatic *abadan* makes this distinction especially clear: in the village setting she describes, ululation is not something to be delegated to an outside specialist. Rhimou's account thus sharpens what is at stake in collective voicing: not simply the presence of multiple voices, but a form of participation whose authority derives from the women who are invested in and enact the occasion.

Cultural force, in this sense, emerges through the density of overlapping voices. The trills generate an acoustic field that exceeds the capacity of any individual voice. As voices join,

[25] A *nəggāfa* is a female wedding attendant in Moroccan marriage ceremonies responsible for dressing and ceremonially presenting the bride. Beyond arranging multiple traditional outfits, she oversees the adornment of jewelry, manages the timing and sequencing of costume transitions, and directs the bride's staged entrances. As such, the *nəggāfa* functions not merely as a stylist but as a ritual specialist who mediates aesthetic display, social propriety, and the transmission of regional bridal traditions.
[26] Rhimou [last name not known], interview with author, July 16, 2022.

audibility intensifies without becoming attributable to a single performer. Their convergence gives the sound weight while maintaining distributed authorship.

This configuration allows loudness to function as recognition without exposure. Women are acknowledged as indispensable participants in ritual life, yet the form itself prevents their vocal presence from becoming a personal claim to authority. What is affirmed is collective alignment: that the moment is worthy, that the transition is legitimate, that the community consents. The sound thus marks communal coherence without singling out an individual voice.

In this way, *tzaghrīta* converts what might otherwise be perceived as risky audibility into culturally legible presence. Its loudness signals participation within social norms and amplifies a sense of collective belonging. The force of the practice emerges from this capacity to make women emphatically audible within the moral order that gives their sounding meaning.

Authorization versus transgression

The force of *tzaghrīta* comes from its ability to inhabit boundaries effectively. Because women's loudness is activated within recognized ritual frames and dispersed through collective voicing, it does not register as a breach of decorum. Its audibility is culturally granted, grounded in recognized conventions of when and how women may sound. Authorization here does not denote permission alone; it describes the culturally recognized conditions through which women's collective loudness becomes capable of marking, organizing, and intensifying particular ritual junctures.
This distinction between authorization and transgression is crucial. Transgression presupposes a boundary crossed—an act that challenges, disrupts, or overturns prevailing norms. *Tzaghrīta*, by contrast, derives its potency from normative alignment. It sounds when communal affirmation is expected; it intensifies transitions already designated as significant; it reinforces ritual order. The practice does not suspend moral vocabulary but operates through it.

Indeed, the very features that prevent individuation—simultaneity, aggregation, patterned brevity—also prevent the act from becoming oppositional. Because the sound is shared and temporally bounded, it does not convert into a platform for personal visibility. Women do not claim authority in abstraction; they exercise a socially established function. Loudness appears not as defiance but as fulfillment.

This does not mean that *tzaghrīta* lacks force. On the contrary, its authority is palpable. It commands attention, punctuates ceremony, and renders women's participation unmistakable. Yet that force is sustained precisely because it is granted. Authorization is embedded within symbolic order: the practice is intelligible as appropriate, fitting, and necessary. Its power stems from confirming moral norms at decisive points in ritual life. In this sense, *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a matricultural configuration of vocal authority. Women's loudness is culturally delimited and thereby effective. Boundaries remain intact even as women assume a powerful acoustic presence. The practice illustrates how social systems can generate powerful forms of presence without relying on inversion or rupture. Loudness acquires legitimacy by operating within the contours of constraint.

Through collective voicing, bounded activation, and normative alignment, *tzaghrīta* demonstrates that authorization itself can be generative. The sound carries weight because it is socially legible, temporally precise, and communally sustained. Its cultural force lies not beyond the boundary, but at it.

Matricultural Ordering in Jebala Social Life

Tzaghrīta *within gendered symbolic systems*

The patterned activation, collective structure, and bounded authorization of *tzaghrīta* are not isolated features of a single ritual practice. They reflect a broader matricultural ordering within Jebala social life in which women's symbolic presence is central yet delimited. What appears, at the level of performance, as calibrated loudness is, at a wider scale, an expression of how gendered symbolism is organized.
Across the life-cycle events examined above, women's voices mark moments in which the social fabric is reconfigured. Marriage, birth, departure, return, and death are not merely private experiences; they are communal transitions that require recognition. *Tzaghrīta* provides that recognition in a form that is unmistakably gendered. The practice positions women as indispensable participants in the reaffirmation of collective continuity. Their sound does not accompany ritual; it completes it.

This centrality, however, does not entail inversion of hierarchy. Women's loudness does not suspend the broader structures of authority that organize public life, nor does it displace male leadership within political or juridical domains. Instead, *tzaghrīta* illustrates a system in which symbolic indispensability coexists with differentiated roles. Women occupy a domain of ritual ratification and affective affirmation that is socially necessary yet contextually bounded.

Such an arrangement reveals that reinforcement and centrality are not mutually exclusive. The activation of women's voices at ceremonial thresholds strengthens the existing order by marking its legitimacy. When women ululate, they do not disrupt social continuity; they signal that continuity is being properly enacted. The practice therefore stabilizes rather than destabilizes hierarchy. It confirms that roles are being fulfilled, transitions properly observed, and communal ties reaffirmed.

Seen at this scale, *tzaghrīta* becomes legible as one articulation of a wider symbolic logic in which gendered differentiation structures participation without erasing significance. Women's social importance is real and consequential, but concentrated within specific culturally sustained domains. The boundaries surrounding their vocal presence give that importance its particular contours. Matricultural ordering, in this sense, distributes symbolic authority through differentiated social roles and domains.

Implications for matriculture

If *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a matricultural configuration of authorized loudness, the Jebala case also suggests a defining feature of matricultural systems more broadly: their uneven operation across social domains. Women's symbolic power is not uniformly distributed. It is activated in specific contexts, tied to certain occasions, and delimited by recognizable conventions. This unevenness is not a flaw in the system but one of its constitutive principles.

Within ritual thresholds, women's voices become indispensable. Their ululations ratify transitions, intensify communal recognition, and render collective alignment audible. Outside those thresholds, however, the same vocal intensity may be inappropriate or unwelcome. The legitimacy of women's loudness therefore varies across social domains, taking force within the settings that authorize it.

This patterned unevenness clarifies why symbolic centrality does not dissolve hierarchy. Women may occupy positions of acoustic prominence in ceremonial space while remaining constrained in juridical, political, or formal decision-making domains. These differentiations are not accidental inconsistencies; they are structural distinctions. Matriculture operates through distribution, not homogenization. It assigns weight without erasing boundaries.

Understanding this logic prevents two common misreadings. First, it avoids interpreting women's ritual centrality as covert domination or latent matriarchy. Second, it resists

framing bounded activation as mere repression. The system neither inverts nor silences; it differentiates. Meaning and legitimacy are generated precisely through calibrated limits. Because authorization is situational, its activation carries force. Because it is not diffuse, it retains intensity.

Tzaghrīta thus offers one instantiation of a broader symbolic ordering in which women's social significance is real, consequential, and culturally sustained—yet always contextually defined. The boundaries that circumscribe women's audibility do not negate their authority; they structure it. Matriculture, in this sense, names a configuration in which symbolic power operates through patterned activation, collective enactment, and productive constraint.

Conclusion

Restating the argument

This article has argued that *tzaghrīta* is best understood as a matricultural system of authorized loudness. Its force derives primarily from how it is structured, activated, and delimited within Jebala social life, giving form to expressions of joy, affirmation, and communal enthusiasm. Women's vocal intensity emerges within bounded ritual settings, operates through collective simultaneity, and acquires legitimacy through alignment with shared moral vocabularies.

By tracing the contexts, conventions, and moral calibrations that govern its sounding, this analysis has shown that *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a patterned distribution of symbolic authority. Its loudness is culturally granted, regulated through the contexts in which it becomes appropriate and effective. Within these conditions, women occupy positions of acoustic centrality without dissolving established hierarchies. Through simultaneity and collective voicing, individual exposure recedes as vocal agency becomes distributed among the group.

Seen through a matricultural lens, *tzaghrīta* reveals how boundaries function productively. The limits placed on women's audibility help generate the conditions under which loudness becomes meaningful and effective. Women's social significance is neither illusory nor unbounded. It is situational, culturally sustained, and symbolically indispensable within specific domains. *Tzaghrīta* thus stands as one instantiation of a broader logic in which authorization, regulation, and collective voicing converge to produce socially legible forms of presence.

Broader contributions

By reframing *tzaghrīta* as a matricultural configuration of authorized loudness, this study contributes to broader discussions of gendered sound, symbolic power, and the regulation of public presence. The analysis shows that women's audibility can be both bounded and consequential, a configuration that is difficult to capture through familiar accounts of silencing and resistance, repression and empowerment. Loudness need not signify rupture; it may function as an integral component of social continuity.

This perspective complicates prevailing assumptions in sound studies and gender theory that equate vocal prominence with individual assertion or political transgression. *Tzaghrīta* offers a different configuration, in which collective voicing creates a consequential form of public presence while remaining embedded in existing social relations. Its force comes from the patterned distribution of symbolic authority across particular moments, roles, and domains.

More broadly, the article underscores the analytic value of matriculture as a framework for examining uneven symbolic authority. By attending to how boundaries operate productively—activating women's significance in specific domains while constraining it in others—the concept offers a vocabulary for understanding gendered power beyond dichotomies of domination and liberation. Matriculture directs attention to the cultural logics through which legitimacy is conferred, roles are differentiated, and presence becomes socially intelligible.

In this light, *tzaghrīta* offers a regional instance of a wider anthropological pattern: the generation of meaning through calibrated limits. Women's voices achieve considerable loudness within specific contexts, their centrality bounded by the occasions that authorize it. It is precisely this patterned unevenness that gives the practice its force. Recognizing such configurations expands how we theorize gender, sound, and social order, inviting attention to forms of authority that emerge through the inhabiting of boundaries.

Biography

Hicham Chami is an ethnomusicologist and Lecturer at Brandeis University. He received his PhD from Columbia University (2024). His research examines music, gender, and cultural marginalization in northern Morocco, with a particular focus on the Jebala region, combining ethnographic fieldwork, historical analysis, and sound-based cultural theory.

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