The virtual wholesale migration of post-pubescent males from the Ighrem region of the Moroccan Anti-Atlas mountains to northern Moroccan cities and to Europe leaves families behind, to inhabit the remote mountain villages for most of the year. Migrants return strongly emotional and economic links to their home villages, which they may not see or visit for the annual return. This scattering of people makes it difficult to circumscribe the boundaries of any given local community. But people try to do just that through collectively-produced songs. Groups, establishing where alliances begin and end in the Anti-Atlas, and about how people make sense of the emotional and social ramifications of human movement.

Although some migrant men take their wives and children to Casablanca with them, most women and children remain behind on the remote mountain village, watching people and goods come and go, which constantly renew some of their ruralness and the complexion of dioidain and nostalgie with which city dwellers perceive their way of life. More immediate concerns are tending the sparse, rain-fed barley fields and the animals which provide the staple of their diet, and ensuring peaceful social relations. The work of maintaining community in these far-flung hills involves ensuring coherence within social groups, establishing where alliances begin and end, and carefully overseeing movements in and out of the villages. This constant monitoring helps ensure a level of comfort within volatile social and economic constraints. Returning migrant workers have been subsidizing the females who stay behind and keep Anti-Atlas traditions alive since at least the first quarter of this century, when French colonial ethnographers began documenting village demographics. One local oral tradition is the call and response genre of Tizrit poetry, which is sung in four to six-part verses. The Tizrit are not flashy; they require bare voices with no accompanying drumming, musical instruments or dancing. They will probably never make it onto the ‘folklore’ circuit performed in package tour hotels in Ighrem cities. Instead, the verses are performed by female villagers off-stage, so to speak, marking liminal moments and spaces: when people are sitting waiting to be served meals, riding the back of a popcorn truck from the bride’s village to that of the groom, or welcoming guests into a village. They are sung in a selected, melodic style. Women, both through the practice of singing Tizrit and in the words themselves, reaffirm the bonds linking villages and tribes by articulating centrally-held norms. Interdependence may be articulated explicitly, such as in the verse sung by a grandmother sitting with the bride’s fellow villagers at the home of the groom:

Female who spend the year in the city without hearing these verses cannot produce them even if they understand and can speak Tizelhit, which is not the case for many contemporary schooled city-dwellers, despite their mountain origins. Females who divide the year between the city and village helps ensure a passive familiarity with the verses but reveals this quiet. Leaves the year-long mountain villagers to sing out. Appropriately enough, the verses reflect very local experience.

The significance of locality takes on a different meaning for migrant villagers estranged from their lands than for the year-round residents. In the Anti-Atlas, this corresponds roughly to a gender division. One recurring theme illustrates this division: that of the tamazirt, a word that could be glossed as ‘homeland’ or ‘country-side,’ as well as the more generic ‘place.’ Both the Arabic and Berber culture seeks a place in which members share daily labours and simple joys. In the Anti-Atlas, it is perhaps less important what one says than the fact that one says something.

Regardless of whether they spend the bulk of the year in cities or mountains, people attached to the Anti-Atlas are hyper-aware of movement. Men move from the countryside to the city to earn a living. For many women, the most significant move they will undertake is from their parents’ home to that of the groom. Marriage in rural Morocco is more about this move than about romance.

The common Tizrit word of saying ‘she is going to marry a boy in a place called Tamazirt’ (in TAMAZIRT) means ‘she is going to TAMAZIRT’ or literally, ‘she wants TAMAZIRT.’ The theme of movement is reflected in wedding verses, as the lyrics vary with the being sung, while moving in and between communities.

The grandmothers who act as gatekeepers between the mountain hamlets are the ones authorized to call out such verses. Girls are less interested in maintaining community boundaries than are in crossing them – whenever they feel like it, except for a few occasions which will broaden their familiarity with the social and geographical environments of their village.

Migrants are an integral and crucial component of village communities and economies, providing the necessary revenue to sustain the rural population as well as the widely-valued symbolic capital of urban familiarity which they share with villagers during their annual return. The two polies of what sustains the concept of the tamazirt – men in the cities who make money and women in the countryside who work men’s work and maintain family honour – are the people whose voices are heard in collectively-produced community music. Women’s singing of the Tamazirt genre of Tizrit poetry in liminal moments solidifies ties between rural communities and expresses non-metaphorical emotional attributes of the ways villagers speak, mark boundaries of places that are not one’s own.

In another verse, a woman articulates the widespreadAnti-Atlas norm of respecting the boundaries of places that are not one’s own:

If you arrive at the edge of a tamazirt pull back your foot until the people of that tamazirt welcome you there.

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