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Culture as text: hazards and possibilities of Geertz's literary/literacy metaphor

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This paper considers the conceptual, ethnographic, ethical, and methodological implications of Geertz's influential metaphors of culture as 'text' and of fieldwork as 'reading.' In Morocco, one of Geertz's two long-term field sites, large segments of the rural population, Berber-speaking even more than Arabic-speaking, are unschooled and nonliterate. Women's rich expressive culture, including religious culture, is oral. Drawing on long-term fieldwork among Tashelhit-speaking Berber women in southwestern Morocco, I consider the language ideologies that shape women's attitudes toward the production and dissemination of religious oral texts. These ideologies complicate the supposed transparency of Geertz's literary/literacy metaphor. The paper reconsiders the possibilities of this metaphor for the anthropology of language, and locates Geertz's contribution and critical responses to it within the history of ideas and ethics shaping ethnographic research.

Keywords: language ideologies; religious language; oral culture; text; Clifford Geertz

At the heart of the interpretive anthropology Clifford Geertz pioneered, or at least popularised, is the metaphor of culture as text. He wrote in 'Deep play,' his description of the Balinese cock-fight, that,

> The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. (Geertz 1973a, p. 452)

Moreover, in his article, 'Thick description,' he commented on these 'texts':

> [W]hat we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to . . .. (Geertz 1973b, p. 9)

This metaphor has typically been considered a literary one, particularly in light of other parts of Geertz's oeuvre where he emphasises the layers of interpretation or translation inherent to the practice of ethnography (Keesing 1987, p. 166), always intended to tack back and forth between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives. The use of metaphor and imagery was central to Geertz's vision of a revamped social science, and especially anthropology, that would take its cues as much from the humanities as the hard sciences. It is fair to say this

was part of the literary move, but also methodologically it drew attention to the anthropologist's task of writing or encoding. As Mitchell has noted,

> [C]riticisms of Geertz's work fault it for failing adequately to distinguish the natives' cultural text from the interpretive text of the anthropologist (a difficulty Geertz admitted himself from the beginning). They do not tend to question what is meant by a text. (Mitchell 1990, p. 576 n 5)

This is deeply problematic when one considers the work of anthropologists to be the rendering and sense-making of cultural texts.

Here and elsewhere, the culture-as-text metaphor has been roundly embraced and critiqued. It is not my intention to evaluate these assessments except insofar as they pertain to the argument I will elaborate regarding ideologies of text from the perspective of the Tashelhit Berber–speaking women with whom I work in southwestern Morocco, many of them nonliterate. For those praising and critiquing Geertz's insights, the humanistic component of his work becomes the focal point, particularly his emphasis on multiple layers of interpretation involved in fieldwork and the production of ethnographic 'truth' more broadly speaking, truth that by necessity can only be partial, synchronic, and piecemeal.

Geertz's attendant claim was that culture is public and evident in human behaviour (influenced by Wittgenstein's belief of language as public): 'Culture is public because meaning is' (Geertz 1973b, p. 12). Even belief, then, should be understood through the practices that it shapes and thus there is no need to get inside the heads of the Other (as if that were possible). This focus on culture as comprised of public systems of meaning was an important intervention at the time, when structuralists and ethnoscientists were insisting on the interiority of culture and its grounding in the mind. Moreover, the notion of belief as manifest through behaviour is one I often heard while conducting long-term fieldwork in southwestern Morocco in the late 1990s. My own field notes are full of instances in which people explained others' actions as revealing their desires, so that what mattered was not what one wanted, but what one did (Hoffman 2002, 2008).

As I want to argue here, however, the metaphor of culture as text is not only a literary metaphor, but also a literacy metaphor. It seems to presume that we, whoever we are, share an orientation toward the practice of writing and the nature of texts. What is curious about Geertz's notion of 'reading' another people and culture is its supposedly universal and accessible means of explaining interpretation; presumably, we all read, and we know what reading involves. The levels of interpretation involved appear to be self-evident or at least familiar to the anthropologist. When seen in this light, and considering the places and times in which Geertz conducted his research, these presumptions constitute more of a starting point for interrogation than a fait accompli. It seems to me that scholars of the Maghreb must take into account the orientations toward text held by the nonliterate people with whom many of us work, and with them, to consider their understandings of the political economy of texts, meaning their production, dissemination, and circulation, as well as the ways people interpret, authenticate, and grant texts authority.

When these 'texts' are written artifacts, the question of access is acute, as questions of power immediately arise, particularly because individuals' access to literary practices is conditioned by wealth or poverty, geographical location (often a related concern), but also intrafamily relations – as when parents and especially fathers choose which daughters to send to school, and for how long. Keesing's critique of Geertz's notion of culture as shared as well as public is particularly acute:

> I suggest that views of culture as collective phenomena need to be qualified by a view of knowledge as distributed and controlled – that we need to ask who creates and defines cultural meanings, and to what ends. (Keesing 1987, p. 161)

Keesing contends here that symbolic anthropology, in order to make a lasting contribution, must be situated in a wider theory of society; cultural meanings need to be more clearly connected to the humans whose lives they inform. Moreover, he convincingly contends, views of cultures as collective symbols and meanings must be qualified with a sense of knowledge as distributed and controlled: 'Even in classless societies, *who knows what* becomes a serious issue' (Keesing 1987, p. 161).

Written text artifacts, especially religious texts, can take on a fetish quality for those without the means to decipher them, but such mystification is not limited to written texts. Literacy is a set of practices, as Street (1984) argues in his approach to cross-cultural studies of literacy; literacy is not simply the possession of the skills of reading and writing, nor a transformed state of individuals and societies. By considering literacy as a set of practices, we can ask what constitutes these practices, who engages in them and how, and who determines which practices are worthwhile and which texts authoritative.[1] When approached from this perspective, the operative concept of text is any kind of written artifact: a book, but also the numbers and street names on a bus, a receipt, a prescription insert (Wagner 1993). Looking at written text is one plausible, and highly fruitful, line of inquiry into the meanings of text, reading, and writing in Morocco, where there is a marked distribution of literacy resources and differential access to any of these texts and literacy practices.

Another way to consider the issue of the authority of texts, however, is to abandon the presumption that a text need be written. Instead we can broaden the notion of 'text' to one used by folklorists and linguistic anthropologists, and that includes the spoken word. Urban (2001) has argued that all 'culture' is really metaculture in that it consists of instantiations of renditions of convictions of what culture involves – that is, recognising the reproduction of culture across time and space and constantly shifting with each iteration. Such understandings presumably move us away from the idea of text as static, with boundaries, and fixed, to be consulted in its entirety and considered as a whole, much as Ricoeur suggested and on which Geertz built. Ricoeur's claim was that in writing we fix 'not the event of speaking, but the "said" of speaking. . .. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event' (quoted in Geertz 1973b, p. 19; see also Silverstein and Urban 1996, p. 1). But, we might ask, where do our Moroccan informants stand on this matter of what constitutes text and its authority?

In this paper, after preliminary comments on the culture-as-text metaphor, I will turn to a few observations from my ethnographic fieldwork among Tashelhit Berber–speakers in Taroudant Province to consider oral religious texts and the writing of culture. Rather than culture as text, these are texts as culture. Geertz's metaphor suggests turning our anthropological subjects into texts to then read, but this dismisses the uniqueness of anthropological fieldwork, as Handelman cogently argues:

> [F]ieldwork anthropology is unlike any of the humanities and other social sciences in that it is not a text-mediated discipline in the first place. Consequently, it is the sole discipline that struggles with the turning of subjects into objects rather than the turning of objects into subjects. (Handelman 1994, p. 341)

By 'text-mediated,' Handelman is referring to 'work whose material and products are both literally textual.'

The metaphor and its critics

Before developing this line of inquiry with ethnographic observations, a brief discussion of the metaphor and its critiques is in order. Keesing calls the metaphor 'dangerous reification'

(Keesing 1987, p. 165). Handelman characterises it as 'the single worst move of [Geertz's] distinctive, highly creative, often brilliant scholarship' drawn in the interest of blurring genres and extolling cultural relativism (Handelman 1994, p. 246). Roseberry's Marxian critique is perhaps the most widely recognised; he argues that Geertz took too much of an idealist position, rather than a materialist one, considering culture as product rather than process. He argues instead that we should 'ask of any cultural text, be it a cockfight or a folktale, who is talking, what is being talked about, and what form of action is being called for' (Roseberry 1989, p. 28). That is, Roseberry contends, the kind of interpretivist anthropology Geertz espoused ignores historical production and the relations of power that produce 'culture' and in which 'culture' is bound. His is essentially a political-economic critique that chastises Geertz for being so focused on symbols that he failed to link them to the broader forces that have shaped them – in Geertz's metaphor, the webs we humans have spun and in which we are suspended. That is, as Shankman et al. (1984) claim in their evaluation of Geertz, the 'text' (or culture) seems separated from its social context. And as Keesing argues, cultures do not just constitute webs of significance, but ideologies, 'disguising human political and economic realities as cosmically ordained.' These ideologies empower some, disenfranchise others, and extract the labour of some for the benefit of others. He implores, 'We need to ask who *creates* and *defines* cultural meanings, and to what ends' (Keesing 1987, pp. 161–162). For in the end, few people do the spinning of webs of significance; most people are just caught in them (p. 162, quoting Scholte).

The second approach to text that I take here is from folklore and linguistic anthropology, where a 'text' may be either oral or written. Bauman and Briggs (1990, 1992) have elaborated the concept of entextualisation, which involves extracting a piece of discourse from one context and embedding it in another. The oral text then has the quality of being bounded and moveable between contexts, as does a written text. These texts may be quotations, jokes, or stories; they shift with each entextualisation. Moreover, the text's meaning – which is ultimately what we are after, if we follow Geertz's lead – depends on this intertextuality. Taken further, these iterations result in the phenomenon Urban calls metaculture: each instantiation or reproduction of a bit of culture is 'meta' in that it constantly comments on itself by containing a notion of an ideal or norm which it strives to attain – or intentionally flout. Each time an *aḥwaš* collective dance is performed in the Atlas Mountains, for instance, there are certain consistencies and other differences from previous performances. Both performers and audiences have clear ideas about the evaluation criteria for any given entextualisation, and can assess its success or shortcomings. This approach acknowledges that cultural products are integral to cultural processes. Perhaps here we are reconciled with Geertz, but maybe not.

Geertz drew attention to the practice of ethnography as both fieldwork and textual artifact, and attended most importantly to the relation between them. He wrote,

> The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted. (Geertz 1973b, p. 19)

However, Geertz's position becomes problematic when we recall that the 'it' recorded by the fieldworker already consists of entextualisations performed by the people being studied. The fieldworker writes things down – things that were already his or her translations of the informants' interpretations of what people were doing, saying, and meaning – and then the fieldworker returns repeatedly to these field notes consisting of experiences and conversations rendered into text, and tries to make sense of things. By that point, however, the complexity

of experience and the barrage of semiotic information has been selected and distilled into smaller and more simplified portions that then become the definitive representation of the experience or conversation. (Even the making of audio and video recordings, on which Geertz did not comment, requires selection and reification, and forces the researcher to consider how much of an event to record, what and whom to exclude, and how to deal fairly with a wide range of audibility in the data collected.) Fieldworkers do their best, at least when they work with *niya* or good intentions, but such are the conditions of the trade. Geertz was right to lay at least some of these conditions bare, and most importantly as he saw it to consider their effect on the analysis and description through which anthropological text artifacts, ethnographies, are produced.

There is another, arguably more sinister or at least Euro- and literacy-centric bias to Geertz's culture-as-text metaphor that renders it problematic and begs the question of insiders' understandings of text and power. Conquergood, for one, sees the emphasis on text as potentially silencing the subaltern and removing the performance of culture from considerations of its construction and reproduction (Conquergood 1998; also Palmer and Jankowiak 1996). This is particularly true in places like rural Morocco where access to texts is highly limited, relegated to specialists, and subject to criteria such as linguistic code to be decoded (classical or colloquial Arabic, French, Tamazight, etc.). As Ortner (1997, p. 4) correctly observes, Geertz largely stayed away from the trend starting in the 1970s toward examining questions of power. Even the ethnographic material he presented, some argue, cries out for an analysis of power differentials that Geertz instead described as 'clash of cultures' or 'confusion' of tongues, as Ortner argues in the episode over a French colonial officer taking a Jewish shepherd's sheep and unjustly sending its owner to jail (p. 4). Yet, does *not* engaging directly with political issues render an anthropologist dispassionate or, worse, unaware? Renato Rosaldo (1997), for one, argues that in Geertz's case it does not, for Geertz's plan was deeply moral and ethical, about humanity and interconnectedness. That may be, but I still want to suggest that Geertz's work displayed a marked insouciance toward the cultural meanings of text. This is despite, as Ortner argues, Geertz's placement of agency as central to questions of power, and his emphasis on accessing the actor's point of view. As Mitchell argues, for instance, 'the conception of a people's culture or political consciousness as a text employs a problematic and distinctively modern notion.' Moreover, meaning is never abstract but rather emerges from situated performances (Mitchell 1990, p. 561).

I am intentionally leaving aside the question of culture itself – or rather, presuming it exists (whatever 'it' is), that it matters, and that it is built of symbols that people endow with meaning. Instead I take the premise Ortner advances: that even if cultures were never and are never whole, complete, boundable, and distinguishable from each other, we can still accept 'the fundamental assumption that people are always trying to make sense of their lives, always weaving fabrics of meaning, however fragile and fragmentary' (Ortner 1997, p. 9).

When 'text' is religious, there is an undeniable power attached to it. Among the Tashelhit-speaking Berbers I work among in the Sous Valley and Anti-Atlas Mountains, this is certainly true of anything related to Qur'anic or other religious Arabic. Arabic text may be considered powerful not only in the sacred book, but in ritual contexts as well, as when a *fqih* writes a verse on paper that he dips in water to unleash the ink that the infirmed then drinks; or, in more mundane circumstances, as when an ill person feels intimidated by a prescription insert, or fears inscription for census, tax, or fieldworker data-collection purposes (Wagner 1993, pp. 29–30). Spoken 'text' may be powerful as well. Berber-speakers may evaluate fellow Berber-speakers as *šiki* or snobbish for speaking in Arabic; Qur'anic recitation and prayer are

considered calming by many (Haeri 2003); reciting or listening to Tashelhit-language '*hadith*' (chanted religious parables and sometimes song) can be seen as a pious act. In each of these intertextual encounters, there is a stress on the oral text's integrity or physicality. From an emic perspective, the mere inscription or recitation is the act or the product; its importance is self-evident and does not require interpretation. Meaning, in this view, comes from the engagement with the written or oral text itself.

Rural Berber women themselves – not just the anthropologist – insist on the transportability and entextualisation of cultural texts. Scholars may see these performances as fragmentary, but the Berber women I worked with did not, instead comparing each instance against an ideal, an originary moment – a perfect model. How such entextualisations measure up is not a matter of anthropological concern, but it does matter to our informants. A key criterion for them is textual integrity: the oral text must be complete to be good. By way of illustration, I take the example of Tashelhit women's oral religious poetry and story-telling.[2] I focus here on a 'hadith' or parable specialist, the elderly Lalla Kiltum who lived her late adulthood and died in an Ida ou Zeddout village during my fieldwork. Her roots were in the Tata region, and she had a reputation as something of a local religious authority, albeit differently skilled than the male *ṭalîb*, with whom women had contact only insofar as they were required to rotate serving meals to him and consulted him in times of illness. In examining Lalla Kiltum's orientation to religious text, and text as culture, I want to suggest that more is at stake than the largely professional question of appropriate practice in anthropology or area studies. Missing from Geertz's approach is a consideration of how nonliterate people themselves select, extract, render, embed, and otherwise turn fragments of 'culture' and 'text' into meaningful practice.

I turn now to a few ethnographic considerations of the entextualisation of sacred texts as cultural process and product. In selecting these examples, I necessarily recall the fieldwork process about which Geertz wrote:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalised graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (Geertz 1973b, p. 10)

This was what Geertz called 'nook-and-cranny' anthropology, intended to build knowledge in spurts rather than cumulatively. Many fieldworkers recognise how partial perspectives are when in the field, and yet, in leaving the field and rendering experience into scholarly text, there is a tendency to strive for what is ultimately an unattainable coherence.

Ethnographic considerations

Literary representations of sacred entextualisations

Geertz's insistence that fieldworkers 'write things down' is deceptively simple, and those of us working with transcription often work with assistants. Native transcribers can operate according to different language ideologies than the fieldworker. There may be disagreement over what to write down from a recording, how to write it down, and how to interpret it. As fieldworkers, we are concerned,

> not with how anthropologists write down what they hear, or not only with that problem, but also with how natives, trained in the practice of writing or . . . reproducing and then translating, render spoken discourse that has been lifted from one co(n)text via the then extrinsic technology of tape-recording. (Silverstein and Urban 1996, p. 3)

I experienced these challenges with my university-educated and highly attentive transcription assistant, Latifa, while in the field. When we first set to work together on my Tashelhit-language cassette recordings in 1996, there was no standardised transcription convention for Berber, and many thinkers were preoccupied with the question of script choice, a question on which many experts and intellectuals, as well as Amazigh activists, weighed in. Should printed Berber be written in Arabic, Latin, or Tifinagh script? I had my own opinion on this matter, but more immediately, there was the question of how to transcribe by hand fluently and efficiently from my audio recordings with Latifa. We chose Arabic script, since she said she was most comfortable in it and could work quickly in it, and because it was well suited for the sounds found in Tashelhit (and could be easily adapted to represent Berber-specific sounds). There were no standard conventions at that point, nor word segmentation principles, and we had to develop our own. Issues arose immediately: do we transcribe exactly what was said, and if so, how do we graphically represent individual performances of speech to capture such characteristics as prosody? If someone makes an error in grammar, pronunciation, or lexicon, should it be corrected in the written record? I said no, and Latifa sometimes said yes, especially since we were using these transcripts as scripts for my own language learning: they were prescriptive as well as descriptive and thus served two purposes.

We also had to resolve a question that is most relevant to the topic of the present article: what should we do when a piece of 'text' such as a Qur'anic verse or Arabic proverb is embedded in the person's Tashelhit? What are the transcription rules? Initially, I wanted to apply the same orthographic conventions and principles we used for Tashelhit in transcribing classical Arabic, specifically, that we would write utterances as they were pronounced and performed in the specific interaction being transcribed. Yet, I immediately sensed tension with my assistant over this issue, for writing religious language incorrectly seemed like blasphemy to her. After discussing the issue a few times, it was clear that the tension was not productive, and we revised our conventions for the religious text. Typically when we worked, we listened together to the slowed audio recordings, and I held the pencil and wrote out the words with her repeating sections I found difficult. During our first year working together, this mostly meant that she dictated and I wrote. Working this way allowed me to use writing as an aid to understanding and memory, and it ensured that I remained mentally alert during the long and sometimes tedious hours of transcription. Gradually, however, there was less dictation and more writing, or simultaneous dictation and writing. We developed colour codes for aspects of the verbal interaction we wanted to capture, underlining Arabic words in green pencil, and underlining vocabulary words and phrases in red that we intended to recopy and elaborate on separate sheets of paper to use for our language lessons.

When we came to religious phrases in Arabic, in the end, I simply passed the paper and pencil to Latifa and she wrote them down in *fuṣḥa*, classical Arabic. I considered putting a more accurate graphic representation of pronunciation in parentheses. But who, here, was marking the text? To my assistant, there was something profoundly unsettling about seeing the sacred word rendered profane through a non-standard orthography that privileged voiced entextualisation over standard and idealised written form. We had to find a compromise, or rather, decide who would retreat. I did. Even spoken Qur'anic verses needed to be identical to the written, definitive text of reference: 'the book' (*al kitab*). The transcription rules we had developed together simply did not apply to some intertextual instances. Qur'anic quotation was common in my field recordings in all kinds of everyday encounters as well as in more stylised speech such as marketplace oratory, as Kapchan (1996) reports from her Beni Mellal market material. Much as Haviland (1996, pp. 64–65) reports from his work with Mexican

transcriber-informants, recorders of discourse like Latifa often reject what they consider 'errors' in the texts they co-create.

Sacred verbal texts: Lalla Kiltum's house of hadith

In this second consideration from fieldwork, I want to consider what happens when the text that is entextualised is oral and a perceived rendition of a written sacred text. What kind of text is it, then, and what is the anthropologist 'reading' and 'writing' during fieldwork: the text itself, or the social process of intertextual embedding? To examine these questions, I present another fieldwork interaction from a recording of the recitation of parables and religious lessons (as per Schieffelin 2008) in Tashelhit, called *hadith* by its Anti-Atlas practitioners. I want to consider the understandings of text that emerge from these recitation and listening practices, and how they may contribute to what a Moroccan metaphor of culture as text might look like.

For my analysis of Lalla Kiltum's *dar lhadit*, as villagers called this recitation in Ida ou Zeddout, I am heeding Eickelman's call to focus on contexts in which knowledge is learned, elaborated, and reproduced, and on the value this knowledge has to the communities involved (Eickelman 1985, p. 18). In a traditional style of transmission for religious knowledge, the *shāykh* instructs the *ṭalîb* (e.g. Eickelman 1985). In the oral transmission of texts, there is a tendency to use exact quotation, framed in Arabic by *qāl lū* (Eickelman 1985, pp. 41–42; Kapchan 1996, pp. 142–145) and in Tashelhit Berber by *ina yas*, 'he said' (see the use of *niġ am* in Hoffman 2006, p. 156). There is an interesting authority in oral texts in Morocco where, unlike in Greece according to Ong, they are not considered suspect relative to written texts (in Eickelman 1985, p. 95). As Keesing reminds us, the distribution of cultural knowledge is complex, and there are multiple levels of expertise beyond religion (e.g. genealogies, rituals, magic). Given the diversity of explanations that informants give for culture, it is problematic to consider culture as shared (Keesing 1987). To Geertz's credit, he did advocate looking for the ways meaning is created in daily life. This is one of many directions in which his followers, including Michelle Rosaldo (1980), followed his lead with even more systematic and analysed ethnographic data that, she contended, is rarely transparent and needs decoding.

I met the lively Lalla Kiltum in 1996 in an Ida ou Zeddout village in the eastern Anti-Atlas Mountains where she entertained villagers with her stories over lunch. She was probably in her early sixties, although she claimed not to know her age, and suffered from excess weight and a dermatological condition that appeared to be vitiligo, both of which made her self-conscious with outsiders. (She had never allowed anyone to photograph her, and I was no exception.) The young boy in my host family had mentioned on one of our long walks that there was a *tafqirt* (old woman, Ar. *fqira*) who gave hadith lessons (the term used for parables or religious moralizing tales) during Ramadan. I told him I'd like to meet her; he brought me to her room, and I was pleased to learn that this was the same Lalla Kiltum. She greeted me warmly, saying that one hadith states that if you do not know something, you should ask someone who is learned (*iqra*), and clearly this was what I was doing in seeking her out. I asked her how she learned the hadith, and she emphasised repeatedly that she never studied and was not educated; she just memorised. I told her I would like to tape her recitation, and she agreed. Her father had been a *ṭalîb*, she said, and he called to prayer five times daily. Lalla Kiltum said she learned hadith verses from another woman who had also memorised them. She used to recite on Fridays for the village women, but interest had waned, she said: 'They're busy with housework, or they'd rather just sit now, not like it used to be.'

Lalla Kiltum lived alone; her second husband lived in another house in the village. The villagers considered them both eccentric; a few suggested they might both be possessed by spirits. Her home was a room above a stone compound whose courtyard housed a few cows, chickens, and a donkey. Once inside, only the open door provided light. The room was full of pots and black plastic bags hanging from beams and from nails on the walls. When I arrived with my young host brother around 11 a.m., Lalla Kiltum was just rousing from sleep; she dusted off a teapot and glasses and put a kettle of water on her butane-gas burner. It was clear she did not receive visitors often. She had slept poorly because a draft wafted in under the door all night. She started to warm some *azzkif* (barley porridge) for her breakfast, presuming correctly that we had already eaten. A neighbour girl peeked in to see if she needed anything, and Lalla Kiltum asked her to bring a radio; when the girl returned with it, Lalla Kiltum found the Friday morning religious programming in Tashelhit. Hadith readings and listener question-and-answer sessions were underway. We listened attentively, Lalla Kiltum's ear near the speaker, the children silent. When the programme finished and she emptied her porridge bowl, I asked her to explain the radio hadith. At first she didn't answer, and I faulted my Tashelhit phrasing. I turned to the boy and asked him to ask her so she would understand; he looked uncomfortable and averted his gaze. When I tried asking her again, she responded, 'Look, you should tape the radio, don't ask me. I can't tell you because I don't know those hadith. You have to listen for yourself.' She looked down at my tape recorder and asked why I had brought it. I said I wanted to record her recitation to replay it and better understand. I had understood little from the radio the first time through, I told her: that they were discussing the morning prayer and women in marriage, but not much more. She asked, 'Do you want me to tell you hadith?' I nodded yes, and she put her hand slightly over her mouth and leaned forward, rocking back and forth. She then recited for about 15 minutes.

When Lalla Kiltum finished, she asked whether her recitation was good. I said that it was, and asked her to rephrase in everyday language what she had just recited. She knew that I was learning Tashelhit and had only partial familiarity with it, but again she said that everything one could know about the verses was 'in there,' meaning on the cassette. She asked to listen to the cassette recording, so I rewound it halfway and we listened. When the recording ended, she complained that I had not taped everything; I explained that since the recording was long, I had not rewound it in its entirely. She insisted that I do so, and we listened to it all again. She verified the integrity of the hadith she had recited, repeating that 'everything you need to know is in there.' She declined to rephrase the hadith in everyday Tashelhit, and told me I just needed to listen to the tape closely and repeatedly in order to learn the hadith. Her body and speech relaxed somewhat when I put the tape recorder away. She asked me to drop a piece of dried ginger root in the teapot and serve us. I asked if there were other religious teachings she knew, and she said that she knew some words from the Qur'an 'that they say in mosque' (*timzgida*). As though proving her point, she said *bismillah* and began more recitation off-tape.

A few days later, Lalla Kiltum's husband told me that Lalla Kiltum wanted me to return for tea and recitation. When I saw her next on the village's main path, she greeted me warmly. We walked back to her room, folding back the plastic and burlap sacks that demarcated a chicken coop from the terrace by her door. She pulled her padlock key from a cloth belt around her waist and unlocked the loosely attached door. I teasingly asked her whether she feared intruders and she told me that of course she did.

We ducked at the threshold to enter and she took sheepskins and laid them out side by side in the dark room. She pulled the gas burner nearer to the skins as well as a small aluminum platter holding three dusty tea glasses and a small metallic red kettle. The decorated candy box I had brought her back from Venice stored a small gray box of green tea and a few chunks of

sugar. She located half of a sugar cone in her stash of foodstuffs and handed it to me, asking me to break off more chunks using the tea glass. I told her I feared breaking the glass, so she instead chipped away the sugar pieces. Meanwhile I set the kettle to boil on the burner, rinsed the dusty glasses with water from a two-litre jug, and then rinsed the tea tray, pouring the dusty water into a shallow plastic basin on the floor within reach. I asked Lalla Kiltum whether she still had any ginger root left; she dug into several of the black plastic sacks hanging from wooden poles studding the wall, and found two small pieces. She put them into the spare tea glass and told me to rinse them. While I rinsed, she fetched some shelled raw almonds from another plastic bag. I took the teapot off the burner and put in only a small piece of sugar, as she refused a second. She put a small black skillet on the burner, then quickly browned the almonds before transferring them to a small plastic saucer on which she had poured roughly ground salt from a white plastic jar that formerly held a yoghurt drink. She pushed the saucer in my direction and urged me to eat. We ate the sweet and salty almonds, bursting with the oils brought out by the roasting, and sipped ginger and green tea in silence for a moment.

I asked her whether she would recite another hadith, and she silently nodded her head up and down to indicate that she would. I reminded her of the two we had already recorded; both were about conversion to Islam. The first was a parable of a student who had reached the gates of heaven only to find that his parents had been sent to hell because, unlike their son, they had not converted to Islam. The second told a tale of a girl in the time of the *rumiyyin* (lit. Romans, but also pre-Islamic people and Westerners) who, unlike her parents, publicly recited the shahada despite threats of tarring and burning from the *qadi* and *amġar*; when the girl protested that hell awaited the unconverted, eventually they all saw her wisdom, converted, and were assured a place in heaven.

After my summary of these parables, Lalla Kiltum started reciting from the middle of the second one. My paraphrasings, not surprisingly, did not seem to satisfy her; she recited the parable in full, word for word, without summarising. Fortunately I remembered parts of verses so I could recite a few lines with her. She understood at first that what I wanted was to revisit the second hadith, and so I reiterated that I hoped she would recite for me a new one. Did she know a hadith about the creation of the world, or the creation of people? I asked her. She thought for a minute, and said, 'They know that, those who have studied' (*ġaran*, lit. gone up). I quickly urged her, 'Please recite whichever hadith you want, any one.' She asked, 'Do you want to study?' I said yes, and turned on the tape recorder. Lalla Kiltum got pensive and I stopped rattling the tea glasses and almond dish so as to concentrate fully on her words. She recited a rhythmic chant on *tawḥid* (oneness or unity, one of the names of God) (see Appendix: Qualities of God).

When Lalla Kiltum finished, I turned off the tape recorder and she asked to hear it, as she had each of the times we had taped. She nodded her head up and down in satisfaction as she listened to the entirety of the recording, then I turned off the tape. She sat quietly and so I prompted a discussion about the hadith's meaning. 'It talks about people, about *ɛql* (reason) and *ššk* (doubt),' I remarked. 'What did it say?' I still hoped that she would paraphrase the themes of the verses into simpler Tashelhit, but Lalla Kiltum again refused and I relented. Instead, she repeated a few lines and said, pointing toward the tape recorder, 'It's all there. Study it.'

Conclusions: language ideologies and transmission of religious knowledge

In retrospect, I wonder whether my fieldwork and Tashelhit language learning would have benefited from memorising Lalla Kiltum's verses, as she admonished. Yet I was blocked by the fear

of appearing open to religious conversion. This was a delicate matter given that many people among whom I worked believed that learning Tashelhit and Arabic suggested a latent desire to convert from Christianity, as did the young woman in Lalla Kiltum's parable. While I surely disappointed Lalla Kiltum in this respect, I did learn a few things about language ideologies and knowledge. The themes Lalla Kiltum's hadith raises about culture, oral religious poetry, and recitation bring us back to Geertz's literary/literacy metaphor of culture as an ensemble of texts.

In our interactions, it was clear that Lalla Kiltum treated the 'hadith' parables as texts whose integrity and completeness were essential to their authority. Moreover, 'learning' them involved memorisation rather than content analysis. This orientation explains Lalla Kiltum's desire to verify each oral text's integrity. She was disappointed and disapproving when she suspected that my recording was incomplete. She refused to interpret or paraphrase, which accounts for the young boy's discomfort at my insistence that she explain the verses' meanings. A text, in this view, has an integrity even when oral; wholeness is a precursor to accuracy.

In the case of oral religious texts like the chanted 'hadith,' the transmitter's authority is crucial. Here, the reliable narrator was a non-literate, impoverished, elderly woman whose life had been full of difficulty; she had in turn learned the parables from another non-literate woman. Yet when Lalla Kiltum insisted that the religious authorities broadcast on the radio were more knowledgeable because they had 'studied' religion, she reinforced a conventional hierarchy of authority in which those who 'read' written texts placed higher than those with knowledge of exclusively oral texts.

With the textual turn in humanistic social sciences stimulated by Geertz, one crucial remark that is often overlooked is that access to texts is not equally shared. Oral religious culture is to some extent shared, but it is also in the domain of specialisation, at least insofar as some individuals are considered more authoritative purveyors than others. Cultural capital is inherent in this knowledge, even if the demand for it – in this case, by other women villagers – has decreased and may now have disappeared. More people use 'texts' than the literate, whether these texts are written (Wagner 1993, p. 15) or instead oral, as I have discussed here. These forms of expressive culture necessarily challenge Geertz's proposition that culture be rendered into text, for they ask us to inquire into the multiple meanings and associations people have for texts, and how they may differ from those embraced by textual wordsmiths and anthropologists.

Notes

1. This position contrasts with that of Ong (1982) and Goody (1977) who posit literacy as more of an all-or-nothing proposition.
2. In this article, I will not discuss the *waḍifa*, a month-long corpus of religious songs, chants, and prayers recited collectively by both Berber and Arab women during Ramadan in a saint's tomb in Taroudant.

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Appendix: Qualities of God

Note: Orthographic conventions for Tashelhit used here follow the principle of one grapheme per letter. Where ṣ and ḥ occur together in a word, as in *ṣḥin*, they are pronounced distinct from each other (not as in the English word 'shoe'): ḍ= ض; ṣ= ص;=ḥ ح ; x = خ; š = ش ; ġ = غ ; ɛ = ع

The door to oneness I am opening to you   *Lbab n tawḥid aġ bdiġ a ti nawi*
Help me, my Master   *awsi gis a bab inu*
I depend on you, my Lord   *a bari kiyyi aftklaġ a ilahi*

Oneness is the key to heaven's door	*tawhid ntat a igan tasarut n imi n ljnt*
It's the best of sciences it can turn a person	*laxiyar n lɛlm a tga tnra kra s*
around [save him]	*injm yan*
It came first before humans,	*ntat as izkur bnadm*
he questions it and gets caught on it	*is gis itawsqsa itġwid gis*
Justice is limited to three parts	*lḥukm krad laqsam aġ itgli*
Reason, justice, it's limited to three parts	*lɛql, lḥukm, kra laqsam aġ itgli*
It's ( ) heaven and one whose reason is true	*a igan ljay jnt d kra ṣhan ġ lɛql*
Truth is forever, it won't pass anyone by	*lṣha gis tin abadan ur sar gis izri yat*
It's the impossible,	*a igan lmustaḥil*
something that one never dreamed of	*ur ilin ġ lɛql*
The one that is not eternal it never lasts	*ur gis ṣhin tin abadan ur sar gis izri yat*
The qualities of God are all indisputable	*lwajib aġ kulu natn ṣifat n lbari*
The opposite of them are impossible for God	*lmustahil n nsnt ig ḍd nsnt ġ rbbi*
He obliges all people to [follow] the shari'a	*wajib shrɛ f lmkkalf*
whomever it is	*wana ira igit*
for men and for women, all are one	*ġ irgazn ula timġarin kulu yan ad gan*
Free people and slaves	*lḥrarat ula ismgan*
They must know	*iqn tnd ad isan*
20 qualities of God, proof and more proof	*ɛšrin ṣifat n rbbi dlil d lburhan*
20 descriptors and others for good measure	*ɛšrin laṣda ula kra s izrin*
The prophets knew the wonders of God	*isan lmustaḥil ġ lmur salin n rbbi*
and that which has passed	*ula ma das izrin*
The one following the righteous One	*yan dar iṣh tawḥid*
won't fear Satan	*ur iksud iblis*
One who memorises them without proof	*yan tnt iḥsan bla dlil*
he is the learned one	*nta a iġli*
One who doesn't memorise them	*yan tnt ur iḥsin*
without proof he is of the animals	*bla dlil nta a igan ġ lbhaym*
he thinks he is of the people	*iḥal is nit iga ġ ladmin*
The one who memorises them without proof	*yan nit iḥsan bla dlil*
he is the one *lmuqalid*	*nta a igan lmuqalid*
how many groups there are	*mnaw laqwam lan gis*
Believer turn your back on	*a mumn iɛṣan ini idrk*
those who memorised they won't learn;	*a tnt ḥsun ur a iɛṣan*
Say God doesn't take care of me	*ini ur idrk ur a inklf rbbi f nfs*
the one who is able	*ila d mami tzdar*
in the holy Quran there's enough to grab you	*ġ lquran lɛḍim aġ nit ila d ġwi yan*
Sidi Sherif it says in some books	*sidi šrif a tinan ġ lbɛḍ n lktb*
We took it and we followed it	*nasit imtbɛat gis*
20 qualities of God we want to present	*ɛšrin ṣifat n rbbi as riġ a tnd nawi*
We'll follow each one,	*ku d yan nstbɛais*
the opposite of each is apparent to us.	*ḍid ns iḍhr nit*
Ancient is God,	*lqdim a iga rbbi*
older than even the skies	*lqdim ila urta ka lin ignwan*
and there is not one creature except you	*ula ila gis yan umxalq a ilahi bla kiyyi*
Ancient is God, we have nothing	*lqadim a igan rbbi tinġ ur a skrt yan*
except what he leaves us	*tins a infldn ġ lemur*
Food for example,	*lmtl n ṭɛm*
if one eats he creates from it	*iġd iša yan ixlq gis*
God not food creates	*rbbi urd ṭɛm ar tḥlqt*
His will is his he does as he wishes	*larada tins ur a iskr s ma ira*
All that he doesn't want	*kulu ma ur iri*
won't be impossible for us	*ur ikun f lmuḥlt aġ*

One won't be ignorant of it	*ur as gis ijhl yan*
Now ( ) or doubt or ( )	*ġikn d ḍn ula šš̌k ula lmahuras*
He knows all under the earth	*iɛlm f kulshi ilit ġ du sa ikaln*
or in the sky	*nġ ila ġ waḍan sa ignwan*
One, belief, oneness is God	*lwaḥid a niyya lwaḥid a iga rbbi*
The Ancient is God	*lqadim a iga rbbi*
An example is food	*lmtl n ṭɛm*
if one eats he creates from it	*iġt iša yan ixlq gis*
God not food creates us	*rbbi tawant urd ṭɛm aġ txlqt*
His will he doesn't do what he doesn't will	*liradat ns ura iskr s ma ur irin*
He isn't in the realm of the impossible	*ur ikun f luḥlt*
There's nothing he doesn't know	*aġ ig ur as gis ijhl yat*
A place ( ) or doubt or ( )	*makan ḍ dn ula šš̌k ula lmahuras*
He speaks without a mouth,	*ar isawal bla imi*
he sees without eyes	*ar itanay bla ṭit*
he hears without ears	*ar isflid bla imzgan*
Even an ant if it runs along	*mqar t ṭuft iġ tzri*
the bottom of a stone press he hears it	*ġ isli isfld as*
Be it in one's heart or above the skies	*ilit d kra ġ lqlb nġd ila ġ waf ignwan*
or under the earth God knows about	*niġd ila ġ dusa italn kwashi*
everything he saw everything	*iɛlm flas rbbi kulshi izrat*
He has seen everything	*kulshi iqrb isi*
20 qualities of God we are offering them	*ɛshrin d ṣifat n rbbi azriġ a tnd nawi*
To the one who doubts,	*yan gisnt iškan*
the one who understand tells.	*ɛud nasnt wali ifhmnin*