

Amazigh music: tradition and modernity

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ABSTRACT: Amazigh music is one of the pillars of Morocco's intangible cultural heritage, reflecting the history, beliefs, and social practices of its communities. This article examines how this musical tradition has stood the test of time, adapting to sociocultural and technological changes. The issue at stake is understanding how Amazigh music manages to preserve its authenticity while integrating modern forms of creation and dissemination. The methodology is based on a documentary and comparative analysis, drawing on academic, ethnomusicological, and institutional sources. The results highlight three main areas: the persistence of strong social and identity functions, the emergence of new hybrid artistic forms, and institutional promotion through festivals and digital media. The conclusion emphasizes that Amazigh music perfectly illustrates the fruitful tension between tradition and modernity, while remaining an essential vehicle for identity and cultural transmission.

Keywords: Amazigh music , Intangible cultural heritage ,Tradition , Modernity , Cultural transmission , Promotion

1. INTRODUCTION

Amazigh music, rooted in the millennia-old history of North Africa, is an essential vehicle of memory and identity for Berber communities in Morocco and the diaspora. It accompanies social rituals, seasonal celebrations, and moments of everyday life, embodying an intangible heritage passed down from generation to generation. Far from being static, this musical tradition is constantly evolving, incorporating new forms and hybridizations while retaining its essence¹. In a world marked by cultural globalization, digitization, and the transnational circulation of the arts, the central question is how Amazigh music manages to combine continuity and adaptation.

¹ Mnouer, M. (2022). The Amazigh Musical Style of Rouicha: Transcending Linguistic and Cultural Boundaries. Review of Middle East Studies, 56, 264 - 276. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2023.12>.

UNESCO emphasizes the importance of safeguarding the living practices that structure collective memory². Amazigh music perfectly illustrates this dynamic: it preserves ancient forms - ritual songs, traditional instruments such as the ribab or bendir - while opening up to modernity through fusions with rock, jazz, rap, and digital distribution³. The question that guides this article is therefore: how does Amazigh music, as intangible cultural heritage, ensure its transmission and evolution in a context marked by modernity and globalization?

To answer this question, the article takes a documentary and comparative approach, drawing on ethnomusicology research, anthropological analyses, and institutional reports. The analysis is structured around three main themes: (1) the social and identity-forming function of traditional Amazigh music, (2) its contemporary transformations through musical hybridization, and (3) its current modes of transmission and promotion.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Intangible cultural heritage

UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines this heritage as the practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that are transmitted from generation to generation, often serving as a vital component of cultural identity for communities around the world⁴. Within this framework, Amazigh music is a prime example of intangible cultural heritage, embodying rich oral traditions and festive practices that have been preserved over centuries. This genre of music not only showcases the unique linguistic and artistic expressions of the Amazigh people but also reflects their collective beliefs, values, and historical experiences⁵. Through its melodies, rhythms, and lyrical narratives, Amazigh music serves as a powerful medium for storytelling, intergenerational bonding, and communal celebration, thereby reinforcing cultural continuity and resilience amidst the challenges of modernity.

2.2. Collective memory and identity

The concept of collective memory, originally articulated by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in 1950, offers a profound framework for understanding how music serves as a vehicle for continuity of identity across generations⁶. Within this framework, Amazigh music stands out as a powerful medium that not only narrates historical events but also articulates themes of nature, cultural heritage, and resistance against adversity. This genre of music thus functions as a vital repository of living memory, preserving and transmitting the collective experiences and values of the Amazigh people.

In parallel, Pierre Nora's influential work on "lieux de mémoire" (places of memory) introduced in 1984, illuminates the significance of music as a symbolic landscape that fosters social cohesion⁷. In this context,

² UNESCO. (2003). *Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel*. Paris : UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/fr/convention>

³ Guabli, B. (2024). Amazigh Indigeneity and the Remaking of Tamazgha. *Current History*. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2024.123.857.347>.

⁴ UNESCO. (2003). *Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel*. Paris : UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/fr/convention>

⁵ Bouziane, I. (2024). Engaged Amazigh Poetry in Meteor Airlines' "Agdal": Reviving Tradition while Addressing Global Environmental Issues. *Journal of Gender, Culture and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jgcs.2024.4.2.10>.

⁶ Green, B. (2018). Popular music in mediated and collective memory. . <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315299310-21>.

⁷ Nora, P. (1989). *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. Representations*, (26), 7-24.

musical traditions can be seen as emotional touchstones, connecting individuals to their cultural past and to one another, reinforcing a shared identity. Both Halbwachs and Nora provide essential lenses through which we can explore the intricate relationship between music, memory, and identity, emphasizing the role music plays in maintaining community bonds and cultural continuity amidst changes in the social landscape⁸.

2.3. *Ethnomusicology and the social function of music*

According to Alan Merriam's perspective on music as a human activity embedded within a social context, Amazigh music can be seen as a complex manifestation of cultural identity and community values⁹. This music does not merely exist as a form of entertainment; it serves significant symbolic, aesthetic, and ritual functions within Berber society. The rhythms and instruments employed in Amazigh music convey deep cultural meanings, expressing themes related to love, resistance, and communal heritage¹⁰. For instance, the use of traditional instruments like the ribab and bendir is not only about musicality but also about maintaining a connection to the past and ensuring the continuation of cultural narratives. Through its performances, Amazigh music reinforces social cohesion and communal identity, proving essential for marking rites of passage, seasonal celebrations, and significant life events.

Bruno Nettl's emphasis on the adaptability of traditional music highlights the importance of understanding how Amazigh music evolves in response to societal changes. This adaptability is crucial in a world marked by globalization and technological advances, where traditional practices often confront modern influences¹¹. Amazigh musicians increasingly integrate contemporary genres such as rock, jazz, and rap, creating hybrid forms that appeal to younger generations while retaining the core essence of their musical heritage. This blending of styles signifies not only a response to changing tastes and cultural exchanges but also a reaffirmation of identity in a modern context. Ultimately, the ability of Amazigh music to adapt while maintaining its traditional roots exemplifies the resilience and dynamism of cultural expression, showcasing how it continues to thrive and resonate within the community¹².

2.4. *Tradition, modernity, and hybridization*

The comprehensive study conducted by Hobsbawm and Ranger on the concept of invented traditions emphasizes that cultural practices are not static; rather, they undergo continuous evolution to address contemporary societal needs and contexts¹³. A striking illustration of this dynamic process can be observed in contemporary Amazigh music, which skillfully reinterprets and adapts traditional melodies and rhythms to resonate within the framework of a globalized society. This modern iteration of Amazigh music not only honors historical customs but also makes them relevant and accessible to a wider audience¹⁴.

⁸ Lamont, A., & Loveday, C. (2020). A New Framework for Understanding Memories and Preference for Music. *Music & Science*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204320948315>.

⁹ Merriam, A. P. (1964). *The anthropology of music*. Northwestern University Press.

¹⁰ Clarke, E., DeNora, T., & Vuoskoski, J. (2015). Music, empathy and cultural understanding.. *Physics of life reviews*, 15, 61-88 . <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plrev.2015.09.001>.

¹¹ Sánchez, H. Bruno Nettl - Educación musical y Etnomusicología.

¹² Oudadene, H. (2022). Lyrical Opponency in Amazigh Music: The Racial and Gender Question in Tanddamt. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 56, 277 - 292. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2023.15>.

¹³ Bunker, S. (1984). *The Invention of Tradition*. ERIC HOBBSAWM and TERENCE RANGER, eds. *American Ethnologist*, 11, 595-596. <https://doi.org/10.1525/AE.1984.11.3.02A00150>.

¹⁴ Guabli, B. (2024). Amazigh Indigeneity and the Remaking of Tamazgha. *Current History*. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2024.123.857.347>.

Moreover, Robertson's theory of glocalization (1995) provides a valuable lens through which we can examine this phenomenon¹⁵. It highlights how Amazigh music successfully navigates the delicate balance between preserving a distinct local identity and integrating diverse global influences. As a result, the genre emerges as a vibrant expression of both cultural heritage and contemporary significance, reflecting the complexities of identity in an increasingly interconnected world¹⁶.

2.5. Heritage preservation and cultural mediation

Heinich's reflections on heritage preservation, as articulated in 2009, highlight the intricate processes through which musical practices are transformed into recognized forms of heritage¹⁷. This transformation occurs through various mechanisms of recognition and mediation. Specifically, festivals dedicated to Amazigh music serve not only as celebratory events but also as platforms for cultural expression and education, bringing together communities and promoting the significance of this musical tradition¹⁸. Likewise, museums play a crucial role by curating artifacts and exhibitions that highlight the historical and cultural contexts of Amazigh music, thereby fostering greater public awareness and appreciation¹⁹. Digital archives contribute to this heritage landscape by offering accessible repositories of recordings, scores, and related multimedia, thus ensuring the preservation and continuation of these musical practices for future generations²⁰. Educational initiatives, through workshops and programs, further engage individuals and communities, nurturing an understanding of the cultural richness and historical importance of Amazigh music within the broader framework of cultural heritage²¹.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on a qualitative, documentary, and comparative approach that focuses on the use of secondary sources. It draws on a varied corpus including scientific articles in ethnomusicology, anthropology, and cultural studies, specialized academic works, as well as sound archives and institutional reports. This diversity of sources allows for the cross-referencing of disciplinary perspectives in order to better understand the richness and complexity of Amazigh music in its historical, social, and artistic dimensions. The aim is to avoid a partial or reductive view and to offer a comprehensive understanding of how this music fits into both tradition and modernity.

¹⁵ Buhari Gulmez, D. (2021). "Chapter 2 The Global-Glocal Nexus in World Society". In *Globalization/Glocalization: Developments in Theory and Application*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004500365_003

¹⁶ Dahraoui, A., & Merolla, D. (2014). *Amazigh culture and media: Migration and identity in songs, films and websites*.

¹⁷ Heinich, N. (2009). *La fabrique du patrimoine (1-)*. Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Ministère de la culture. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsmslh.2642>

¹⁸ Jay, C. (2016). Playing the 'Berber': the performance of Amazigh identities in contemporary Morocco. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21, 68 - 80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2015.1084102>.

¹⁹ Mnouer, M. (2022). The Amazigh Musical Style of Rouicha: Transcending Linguistic and Cultural Boundaries. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 56, 264 - 276. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2023.12>.

²⁰ Bouziane, I. (2024). Engaged Amazigh Poetry in Meteor Airlines' "Agdal": Reviving Tradition while Addressing Global Environmental Issues. *Journal of Gender, Culture and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jgcs.2024.4.2.10>.

²¹ Camlin, D., & Lisboa, T. (2021). The digital 'turn' in music education (editorial). *Music Education Research*, 23, 129 - 138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2021.1908792>.

The methodological approach was organized into three complementary stages. First, the social and identity functions of traditional Amazigh music were identified based on previous ethnographic work and field studies. Next, a diachronic comparison was conducted to analyze stylistic changes and processes of musical hybridization between ancient and modern forms. Finally, particular attention was paid to current means of transmission and promotion, notably festivals, digital platforms, and educational initiatives that contribute to the preservation and dissemination of this intangible heritage. Although this approach did not involve direct fieldwork, it draws on reliable and complementary sources, thus offering a rigorous and representative analysis of contemporary dynamics in Amazigh music.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. *Amazigh music as living memory*

Traditional Amazigh music serves as a vital component of social life within Amazigh communities, intricately woven into the fabric of their cultural practices. It accompanies a variety of significant events—agricultural rituals celebrating the harvest, weddings marking personal unions, vigils honoring the deceased, and spiritual ceremonies that connect people to their beliefs²². The songs, rich in poetic imagery, narrate powerful stories of resistance against adversity, expressions of love, the beauty of nature, and the solidarity that binds the community together. Each performance becomes a communal event that reinforces social ties and fosters a sense of belonging, thereby sustaining the collective memory of the Amazigh people²³. Traditional instruments such as the ribab, bendir, and lotar are not just musical tools but revered symbols of identity, bridging generations as they echo the unique cultural heritage of the Amazigh.

Moreover, this music serves as a significant repository of living memory, capturing the history, values, and experiences of the Amazigh people. As songs are passed down through generations, they preserve the narratives that shape communal identity and promote cultural continuity. In an ever-changing world, traditional Amazigh music remains a dynamic force that resonates with the youth while maintaining connections to ancestral roots. By engaging with their musical heritage, individuals can express their cultural identity and remember shared histories, transforming the act of performance into a cultural dialogue²⁴. This constancy of tradition amidst change underscores the importance of Amazigh music as a living memory that not only narrates the past but also inspires resilience and unity in present and future contexts.

4.2. *Transformations and hybridizations*

Since the 1970s, Amazigh music has undergone a significant transformation, embracing new aesthetics and diverse influences that have enriched its traditional roots. Pioneering artists like Ammouri M'barek and the acclaimed group Izenzaren have skillfully integrated electric guitars into their compositions, along with

²² Becker, C. (2008). A REPLY TO HELENE E. HAGAN'S REVIEW OF AMAZIGH ARTS IN MOROCCO, WOMEN SHAPING BERBER IDENTITY (IJMES 40 [2008]: 341–42). *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40, 725 - 727. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808081841>.

²³ Laghssais, B., & Comins-Mingol, I. (2021). Beyond vulnerability and adversities: Amazigh women's agency and empowerment in Morocco. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 28, 347 - 367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2021.1990048>.

²⁴ Merolla, D. (2019). Cultural heritage, artistic innovation, and activism on Amazigh Berber websites. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 32, 42 - 59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2019.1624153>.

arrangements that draw inspiration from rock and jazz traditions, thereby creating a fresh sound that resonates with contemporary audiences²⁵.

In the more recent wave of musical innovation, several musicians have sought to merge traditional Amazigh rhythms with genres such as rap and reggae, resulting in a vibrant fusion that not only appeals to younger, urban listeners but also maintains a strong connection to their cultural heritage. This creative adaptability exemplifies how intangible cultural heritage can evolve and reinvent itself, ensuring its relevance in a globalized world. The result is a dynamic musical landscape that celebrates Amazigh identity while reaching international audiences, demonstrating a profound ability to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity²⁶.

4.3. *Transmission and promotion in the digital age*

The transmission of Amazigh music is increasingly supported by a wide array of institutional initiatives and technological advancements that amplify its reach and cultural significance. Festivals like Timitar, celebrated annually in Agadir, play a pivotal role in showcasing Amazigh musicians, thus granting them both national recognition and international exposure. These events not only draw local audiences but also attract international music enthusiasts and industry professionals, facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and collaborations²⁷. Additionally, digital platforms such as YouTube and Spotify have transformed how Amazigh music is distributed and consumed, allowing artists to share their work with a global audience effortlessly. This has opened doors for new listeners, enabling the appreciation of Amazigh musical traditions beyond Morocco's borders.

Educational initiatives are also making strides in recognizing the cultural importance of Amazigh music by integrating it into academic curricula at both school and university levels. Such efforts aim to cultivate a deeper understanding of the region's cultural heritage among students, fostering respect and appreciation for its diversity. The practice of digital archiving further enhances this mission by preserving the rich array of Amazigh musical expressions, including traditional songs, oral histories, and instrumental techniques. By safeguarding these valuable resources, digital archives play a crucial role in ensuring that Amazigh music remains relevant and accessible²⁸. As a result, Amazigh music emerges not only as a relic of the past but also as a dynamic tool for intercultural mediation, promoting dialogue and connection among diverse communities through shared musical experiences.

5. CONCLUSION

The study highlights the richness and resilience of Amazigh music as intangible cultural heritage. It reveals that this artistic expression is not limited to a legacy of the past but constitutes a genuine social and cultural dynamic. On the one hand, its central role in collective memory and community cohesion remains essential: it connects generations, transmits historical narratives, and strengthens the sense of identity and belonging. On the other hand, Amazigh music demonstrates a great capacity for adaptation, integrating new aesthetic

²⁵ Mnouer, M. (2022). The Amazigh Musical Style of Rouicha: Transcending Linguistic and Cultural Boundaries. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 56, 264 - 276. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2023.12>.

²⁶ Reimer, M. (2020). Music for one world: Moroccan musical experience of diversity, fusion, happiness, healing, and peace. *The Journal of Global Awareness*, 1(1), 4. <https://doi.org/10.24073/jga/1/01/04>

²⁷ Dines, N. (2021). Moroccan city festivals, cultural diplomacy and urban political agency. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 34(4), 471-485. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-020-09390-4>

²⁸ E. Onyeji, C. Onyeji, "Archiving Indigenous Igbo Musical Heritage in Human Memories: Sustainability Challenges and Digital Transfer as Strategy for Future Recovery of Extinct Musical Forms," *Fontes Artis Musicae*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1353/fam.2023.a915319>

forms and opening up to creative hybridizations that allow it to reach a wider audience beyond its territory of origin. This articulation between tradition and modernity demonstrates that intangible heritage is not a frozen relic, but a living process in constant evolution. Furthermore, the contemporary promotion of Amazigh music relies on institutional and technological mechanisms that play a decisive role in its transmission. Festivals, cultural policies, and digital platforms offer new venues for dissemination and help to establish this music in a globalized space. However, this openness also poses challenges: how can the authenticity of practices be preserved while adapting them to current tastes and tools? Prospects must therefore encourage in-depth ethnomusicological research, support educational initiatives that integrate Amazigh music into cultural training, and develop digital archives accessible to the general public. Only then can the continuity of this living heritage be guaranteed, ensuring its sustainable transmission to future generations.

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