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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank all of my collaborators in Morocco, especially those affiliated with Akaliyat, without whom this research would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my advisors at IU, Jane Goodman, Ilana Gershon, and Beth Buggenhagen, as well as the attendees of KSU’s Year of Morocco conference in March 2019 for their helpful feedback on this article.

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Benjamin Ale-Ebrahim

Abstract
Publicly claiming an LGBTQ identity in Morocco can place a young person under the threat of violence, both on the part of the state, which criminalizes homosexuality under Article 489 of the Penal Code, and from actors within Moroccan society who wish to uphold a heteronormative conception of Moroccan national identity. The internet, with its potential for anonymous communication, serves as a relatively free and safe space for young queer Moroccans to explore their sexuality and gender identity. Akaliyat Magazine, an internet-based publication founded in 2015, serves as one of the only Arabic-language media outlets in Morocco that focuses on providing a space for queer youth to “express themselves” and to hear each other’s stories. In this paper, I develop a brief history of Akaliyat Magazine, drawing on content from the five issues published to date as well as a 2018 interview I conducted with the magazine’s editor and founder. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Richard Bauman to investigate the question of genre and its orientation to specific communities and ideologies, I argue that Akaliyat Magazine uses specific forms of address and genres of writing that work to create a community of queer youth in Morocco.

Introduction
In this paper, I investigate Akaliyat magazine, an internet-based publication founded in 2015 that is one of the only Arabic-language media outlets in Morocco that provides a space for queer youth to express themselves and to hear each other’s stories. I develop a brief history of Akaliyat magazine, drawing on content from the five issues published to date as well as a 2018 interview I conducted with the magazine’s editor and founder. I argue that Akaliyat magazine uses specific forms of address and genres of writing that work to create a community of queer youth in Morocco. I draw on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1994), Karin Barber (1997), and Richard Bauman (2004) to investigate the question of genre and its orientation to specific communities and ideologies. I also discuss what types of discourse Akaliyat employs to address its audience: are they addressed as Moroccan national subjects? As religious or irreligious individuals? As minorities living in a hostile environment? As oppressed people in need of liberation? I argue that Akaliyat
invites its readers to think of themselves as a community of listeners to each other’s stories, a community held together by public intimacy and affective ties of belonging (Kunreuther, 2010). By providing a space that affirms queer sexualities and gender identities, encourages debate about controversial topics such as politics and religion, and - most importantly - invites its readers to listen to each other’s stories, Akaliyat serves a critical role in the creation of queer community in Morocco.

**Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

In his discussion of the many different types of discourse present in the novel, Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin provides a useful analytic for understanding how people use language in conversation with others. He presents his readers with the concept of “double-voiced discourse,” defined as language that is “directed both toward the referential object of the speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 105, italics in original). Double-voiced discourse exists in anticipation of its reception by an audience; it is spoken with the understanding that it will be heard by others. This consciousness of the presence of an audience determines which words a speaker will choose to use and how they will choose to present them, or, to use Bakhtin’s (1994) words, “the individual manner in which a person structures his own speech is determined to a significant degree by his peculiar awareness of another’s words, and by his means for reacting to them” (p. 108). Double-voiced discourse speaks to its immediate audience—to the task at hand—at the same time as it imagines and anticipates a future response—a moment of audience talk-back. Although Bakhtin was primarily concerned with analyzing discourse in the analog genre of the novel, I find that this concept is particularly well-suited to understanding how communication happens in online platforms that support feedback and dialogue, such as the digitally published magazine that I discuss below.

Building off the work of Bakhtin and his concept of double-voiced discourse, Richard Bauman (2004) describes a number of different ethnographic examples from around the world of “how speakers may align their words to the words of others” (p. 128), from Irish poets to Fijian spirit mediums to Akan chiefs. He argues that genres come into being when the “mode[s] of regimenting the circulation of discourse” become standardized and formalized (Bauman, 2004, p. 158); that is, when the speaker first imagines a specific and defined audience and then associates a particular way of speaking as the appropriate way to address that audience. One must address the appropriate audience using the appropriate linguistic conventions in order to be understood as a particular kind of speaker, such as a lyrical poet, a novelist, a radio announcer, or, in this case, a member of the queer community in Morocco.

Karin Barber (1997) takes a slightly different analytical emphasis in her discussion of audiences in Africa. Rather than focusing on the choices that a speaker makes in addressing an imagined and standardized audience, as Bakhtin and Bauman do, she focuses on the productive nature of speaking in the creation of audiences, arguing that:
Performances do not just play to ready-made congregations of spectators which are out there awaiting address; they convene those congregations and by their mode of address assign them a certain position from which to receive the address. Thus performances, in the act of addressing audiences, constitute those audiences as a particular form of collectivity. (Barber, 1997, pp. 353-354)

In other words, collectively listening to others speak teaches us how to think of ourselves as an audience. We learn to understand ourselves as a collectivity on the basis of our use of shared linguistic conventions and our collective status as the intended audience of a genre. Genres and audiences are co-constitutive of each other, taking shape in tandem as specific ways of speaking and listening in relationships formalize over time.

Another way to think about this process is through the analytic of voice and voicing, as Laura Kunreuther (2010) discusses in her study of youth-focused radio programs in neoliberalizing Nepal. She argues that these programs encourage their listeners to use a “direct voice” (p. 335) in speaking about their feelings and intimate relationships when they call in to these radio shows; that is, they encourage young people in Nepal to use a voice which expresses agency over one’s feelings and which indexes a modern, urban, neoliberal self (Kunreuther, 2010, pp. 335-336). Through continued exposure to the radio programs, and from feedback given by the show’s host and from other listeners, young people in Nepal begin to adopt the linguistic features of this direct voice, coming to understand themselves and their identities in a new way: as neoliberal subjects responsible for the cultivation of marketable skills and their own individual economic success (Kunreuther, 2010, p. 343).

We can see, then, that the way in which we choose to speak in public affects how we think of ourselves as individuals and as communities. Our imagination of an audience that we hope to engage with through the use of standardized genres does more than orient our speech to an appropriate group of listeners, it actually works to bring this audience into being, shaping the members of this audience into a collectivity that starts to think of itself as sharing collective feelings, desires, and identities. Through continued exposure to certain genres and ways of speaking, we learn how to think about ourselves in new ways and begin to develop affective ties with others who are the fellow addressees of these genres. It is this complex, co-constitutive matrix of genre, audience, and voice that I wish to investigate in this paper, focusing on how Akaliyat magazine uses specific linguistic and rhetorical features to teach its audience, spread throughout the country of Morocco and beyond, and how they think of themselves as a cohesive queer community.

**Queer Activism in Morocco and in the Broader Arab Context:**

**Legal Regimes and the Role of Social Media**

In order to understand how Akaliyat works to create queer community in Morocco, we must first understand some of the social and legal background surrounding LGBTQ activism in the country. According to Article 489 of the
Moroccan Penal Code, “‘unlawful or unnatural acts with an individual of the same sex’” are criminalized with the potential for punishment of up to “six months to three years in prison and a fine of 120 to 1,200 dirhams ($13-130)” (Fanack, 2018). In recent years, a number of incidents where individuals have been arrested in accordance with Article 489 have prompted public debate in Morocco, including an incident in 2004 where over 43 people in the northern city of Tetouan were arrested and charged with “‘engaging in homosexual activity’” (Fanack, 2018). This incident sparked the creation of Kif-Kif, an organization founded in 2005 by Moroccan LGBTQ activists with the goal of advocating on behalf of queer people living in Morocco. Kif-Kif was prevented from legally registering itself as a nonprofit organization in Morocco and is currently based in nearby Spain (Fanack, 2018). In April 2010, with funding from the European Union, Kif-Kif launched the first LGBTQ-focused magazine in Morocco with the publication of Mithly (Arabic for “homosexual” or, literally, “like me”) (IRBC, 2013). Over 200 print copies of the magazine were distributed in Morocco in 2010 and an online version was also published (Pfeiffer & Abdennebi, 2010). Mithly is currently out of print, however, and appears to have been inactive for some years now. According to Kif-Kif’s website, the organization has shifted its focus and now works primarily to serve the needs of LGBTQ immigrants and asylum seekers in Madrid (Kif-Kif, 2018).

Although the U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012 contends that Article 489 is “‘infrequently enforced’” (IRBC, 2013), queer people continue to be arrested in Morocco, especially in cases where their sexuality is made public on social media. For example, in 2014 a 69-year-old British man and his Moroccan partner were arrested by Moroccan police for violating Article 489. The police used “images on both the men’s phones as evidence” for their arrest (Fanack, 2018). This case attracted attention from the British media and Members of Parliament and the British man was allowed to “return to the UK pending an appeal” while the Moroccan man involved in this case remained in prison (Fanack, 2018). Later, in 2016, after footage of a brutal homophobic attack in the city of Beni Mellal went viral on social media in Morocco, the victims of this attack were arrested and imprisoned before being released 26 days later. Two of the four attackers were sentenced to between “four and six months in prison” while the other two were released (Fanack, 2018). Also in 2016, after being filmed kissing each other on a Marrakech rooftop, two Moroccan teenage girls were arrested under Article 489 and were later acquitted following an international social media campaign using the hashtag #FreeTheGirls (طلقو لبنتان in Moroccan Arabic) (Lutkin, 2016; Morgan, 2016). According to Kif-Kif, “more than 5,000 homosexuals, mostly men, have been tried by the courts for violating Article 489” since Moroccan independence in 1956 while statistics from the Moroccan Ministry of Justice indicate that “there were 81 trials involving charges of homosexuality in 2011” alone (IRBC, 2013).

Although social media platforms are used to incite the arrest of LGBTQ people in Morocco, they also serve an important role for LGBTQ activists based in the country. In addition to Kif-Kif and its now defunct magazine, a number of other queer-focused organizations have emerged to argue for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Morocco and to speak out on behalf of LGBTQ Moroccans on
digital media platforms. For example, the Aswat Collective (2018a) (*aswat* being the Arabic term for “voices”) describes itself as an organization founded in order to lead “the fight against discrimination based on sexuality and gender” ("*la lutte contre la discrimination fondée sur la sexualité et le genre*"). Aswat operates Facebook and Twitter accounts as well as publishing its own “queer, libertarian magazine” online (Aswat, 2018). MALI (*Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles*) is another organization based in Morocco that describes itself as a “universalist, feminist, secular movement of civil disobedience and in defense of sexual and reproductive rights” ("*un mouvement de désobéissance civile, universaliste, féministe, laïque et de défense des droits sexuels et reproductifs*") that advocates on behalf of women and LGBTQ people living in Morocco (MALI, 2017). In May 2018, on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia both of these organizations used their Facebook pages to publish information in support of queer Moroccans and against Article 489 (Figures 1, 2).

Figure 1. Image from Aswat Collective’s (2018) Facebook page depicting two young Moroccans holding up handwritten signs saying, “I am not an abomination (*shaadh*) or a faggot (*luti*) / dyke (*sehaaqia*), I am a homosexual (*mithly*).”
Of course, Morocco is not the only Arab-majority country where queer activists are working to create change. With the exception of Jordan and Iraq, homosexuality remains criminalized in most Arab countries, with legal institutions either explicitly banning consensual same-sex activity (as in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) or using broader morality laws that are consistently interpreted to prohibit same-sex sexualities (as in Lebanon, Egypt, and Bahrain) (Ghoshal, 2018). While there are queer activist movements in most Arab countries, movements in Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon have been among the most successful in campaigning for change. For example, over 10 years ago in Jordan, Khaled Abdel-Hadi worked to found My.Kali, one of the Arab world’s first LGBT-focused magazines that is still in publication to this day (Ghoshal, 2018). In addition, in Tunisia, former President Beji Caid Essebsi recently tasked a government commission, the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee, with drafting new recommendations on how to improve the human rights situation in the country, and among the recommendations submitted by the commission was the legalization of homosexuality (Fitzsimons,
Tunisian queer organization Mawjoudin has sponsored the region’s first queer film festival for the past two years in 2018 and 2019 (Schnall, 2019) while Association Shams, another queer activist group based in the Tunisian capital, launched the Arab world’s first LGBTQ-focused radio station in 2017 (Ghanemi, 2017). More recently, Shams’ chairman Mounir Baatour announced a long-shot bid for Tunisia’s presidency in the 2019 election, campaigning on a platform of legalizing homosexuality and promoting more expansive individual and civil rights (Knipp, 2019).

Despite progress being made in places like Jordan and Tunisia, Lebanon, and more specifically the city of Beirut, remains the Arab world’s queer capital, at least in terms of its high concentration of queer-friendly social spaces and well-established activist organizations. Two of the region’s oldest and most well-known queer organizations were founded in the Lebanese capital: Helem, founded in 2004, is a public-facing NGO that was the region’s first “above-ground” LGBT organization, and Meem, founded in 2007, is a smaller, underground group that broke away from Helem to focus more on queer women’s issues and the trans community (Moussawi, 2015). A number of gay-friendly bars, cafés, and beaches exist in Beirut that, according to anthropologist Sofian Merabet (2014), do not exactly allow for the formation of a cohesive “gay community”—since many Lebanese queer people deny such a thing exists—but rather allow for the existence of a “homosexual sphere,” “a realm that consists primarily of gendered as well as sexual symbols in relation to which queer space is perpetually produced” (p. 112). Helem and Meem, along with Beirut’s gay bars, cafés, and mediated spaces like the dating app GayRomeo (Gagné, 2012) make up the “homosexual sphere” in which queer Lebanese individuals shape their identities and form social connections with each other. Beirut’s comparatively robust queer social infrastructure serves as a useful comparative lens through which we can better understand Akaliyat in Morocco.

Genre, Audience, and Voice in Akaliyat Magazine

With this social, political, and regional context in mind, let us turn our attention to Akaliyat. Founded in 2015 by a single activist with the goal of “releasing a free electronic magazine concerned with the affairs of sexual and religious minorities [aqaliyat jinsiya wa diniya] in Morocco, North Africa, and the Middle East,” Akaliyat is an LGBTQ-focused organization based in Morocco that began as a magazine (majalla), became a “collective” (majmu’a) and now describes itself as an “association” (jam’ia) (Akaliyat, 2018). Akaliyat maintains a Facebook page and a YouTube channel as well its own website (www.akaliyatmag.org) where it publishes Akaliyat magazine in free downloadable PDF format. It is clear from our discussion above that Akaliyat is not alone in advocating for the rights of queer

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1 For the rest of this paper, I distinguish between Akaliyat magazine (in italics) and Akaliyat the organization (unitalicized).
2 Due to financial constraints, Akaliyat’s website, where they publish Akaliyat magazine, is only intermittently active. At the time of publication, Akaliyat’s website is inactive.
Moroccans nor is it unique in using the internet and social media to do so; what makes it stand out is its emphasis on inviting its readers to think of themselves as a community of people held together by certain narratives, framing both LGBTQ people and non-Muslims (here meaning primarily ex-Muslim atheists and converts to Christianity) as fellow marginalized “minorities” (aqaliyat in Arabic, the basis for the organization’s name) within Moroccan society.

According to Akaliyat’s founder and editor-in-chief, whom I had the chance to interview in Rabat in 2018, the organization envisions its audience as Moroccan society as a whole, not just LGBTQ-identified individuals or non-Muslims. The magazine is open to submissions from anyone living in Morocco or abroad who can write well in Modern Standard Arabic or Moroccan Arabic (darija), with the goal of framing itself as a locally-facing organization. Akaliyat prefers not to use French or other European languages in its materials in order to remain focused on its local Moroccan public. It sees its mission as advocating for freedom of expression and individual freedom for all Moroccans, not just queer people, seeking to create a space where all of those without a voice or visibility in mainstream Moroccan society can speak and share their stories. In other words, it is not just an LGBTQ organization but an organization which sees LGBTQ rights as one aspect of the broader right to freedom of expression. For example, one of the organization’s first activist campaigns was organized in opposition not to Article 489 but to Article 222 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes the public consumption of food and drink during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims are expected to fast during daylight hours. Akaliyat works together with other feminist, secularist, and LGBTQ activist organizations based in Morocco, North Africa, and the broader Arab world to achieve its goals. Akaliyat aspires to be a public, officially recognized NGO, having unsuccessfully attempted to register themselves as an official organization with Moroccan authorities in 2016 (Ghoshal, 2018). Akaliyat occupies a similar position in relation to the Moroccan state as Helem in Lebanon, existing as a public-facing, rights-focused organization that is “ambiguously accepted without any official recognition” (Moussawi, 2015 p. 601).

When I asked Akaliyat’s editor about why the organization publishes content exclusively online, he told me that publishing physical copies of the magazine would put its readers in danger because the public sphere is not a safe space for LGBTQ Moroccans to be open about their identities. Until they can achieve legal protection as an officially recognized organization, Akaliyat prefers to restrict the bulk of their activity to the digital media sphere, where there is relatively more freedom of expression. Digital media platforms like Akaliyat, although they present the possibility of being “outed” to undesirable audiences like the state or homophobic members of one’s community, are the only viable tool that many queer Moroccans can use to talk with each other, to read affirming information about queer sexualities and gender identities, and to realize that there are other queer Moroccans who are facing many of the same challenges they face in their daily lives. Unlike GayRomeo in Beirut (Gagné, 2012), however, Akaliyat magazine is not a platform in which users primarily attempt to arrange in-person encounters – the focus is much more on attempting to build networks of community across the
country of Morocco and its diaspora, developing a sense of queer consciousness that is specific to the local social context.

Akaliyat is an organization that does far more than just publish a magazine. Akaliyat’s editor told me that he receives dozens of emails every week from LGBTQ Moroccans around the country asking him to help them find safe places to stay after being abused or kicked out of their homes because of their sexuality or gender expression. He told me that if a queer person experiences violence, especially in rural areas of the country, it is not safe for them to go to the police and they must rely on friends or activist networks like Akaliyat to receive support. There is a severe lack of resources that Akaliyat has at its disposal to help its readers if they find themselves in a dire situation, with the editor devoting a significant amount of his own personal time, energy, and money at his own risk to help those in need who contact him. Although the magazine was originally intended to be published monthly, these significant personal and financial constraints have resulted in the magazine publishing only five issues in its run time to date: Issue 1 in January 2015, Issue 2 in February 2015, Issue 3 in April 2015, Issue 4 in August 2015, and Issue 5 in February 2018. The magazine itself is read by people from across the country of Morocco and abroad. While the editor could not give me statistics on precisely where the magazine’s readers were located, he did tell me that the first issue of the magazine was downloaded over 15,000 times, the second issue was downloaded over 18,000 times, and the organization’s website receives over 10,000 visitors per day as of July 2018.

What types of discourse does Akaliyat magazine use in addressing its readers? Within each issue of the magazine, there are a number of different types of articles and genres of writing, including: interviews with prominent activists of Moroccan descent who serve as “guest of the issue” (dai al-adad) and who appear on the cover, such as a feminist activist affiliated with MALI and an evangelical Moroccan Christian pastor based in Europe (Figure 3); conversations (hiwar khas) with anonymous queer and trans Moroccans who do not wish to share their name or a photo of themselves; news about LGBTQ issues and religious minorities around the world, with a focus on Arabic-speaking countries, framed as “our news” (akhbarna); articles on subjects like the possibility of same-sex marriage in Morocco and how to observe Ramadan as a gay Muslim written by Akaliyat’s editor as well as guest contributors; a question-and-answer section devoted to addressing common questions from readers and social media followers like “Are gay men always feminine?” and “Are lesbians just women who have had bad experiences with men and do they hate men?”; poetry and romantic short stories about same-sex relationships; a section written in Moroccan Arabic (darija), discussing different relevant political or social issues; recommendations on quality queer films available for free on the internet; a section entitled “what happened?” (matha hasala?) where readers describe difficult moments from their past and how they overcame them; and an open space called “my life” (hayati) where contributors are given space to write a short autobiography.

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3 The three year gap in publication is due to the organization’s financial constraints.
Figure 3. “Guests of the issue” (duyuf al-’adad) from Akaliyat Issue 1 (left), a feminist lawyer and activist affiliated with MALI, and Issue 5 (right), a Moroccan Christian pastor based in Europe.
In all of these different sub-genres within the magazine, Akaliyat models for its readers how to talk about queer identities from a specifically Moroccan perspective. For example, in Issue 1, in the interview with the MALI-affiliated feminist activist “guest of the issue,” the editor of the magazine asks her the following question:

Q: Whenever we talk about minorities and their rights in Morocco, we come up against a great deal of ignorance (jahl kabir) about the subject and confusion in understanding. Our “Arab” society specifically singles out sexual and religious minorities (aqaliyat jinsiya wa diniya) [for persecution]. What is your comment on this proposal, if I am correct in saying so?

A: I use the word “minorities” with caution because there are no statistics that we can use to determine the majority or the minority, and freedom of expression does not exist in Morocco that would allow each person to express their religious beliefs or sexual orientation in order for us to have access to these numbers. I also use the term “our Arab society” with caution because we do not live in an Arab society but rather a mix between many different cultures and the use of this term (“Arab”) shows persecution that is not the persecution that sexual and religious “minorities” suffer from but rather the cultural persecution and marginalization that the Amazigh have suffered for example. (Akaliyat, 2015, my translation)

In other words, she argues that sexual and religious minorities are marginalized communities like the Amazigh (Berber) population of Morocco, the indigenous people of North Africa to whom most Moroccans can trace some degree of ancestry and who were recently given official recognition of their language and cultural rights after a long history of persecution and struggle (Fanack, 2017; Hoffman & Miller, 2010). Like the Amazigh, she argues, so-called “sexual and religious minorities” may in fact make up the majority of the Moroccan population—there are simply no statistics out there that prove that LGBTQ people or supporters of secularism are not the majority because no Moroccan has the right to freely express their religious beliefs or their sexuality in public, Muslim or non-Muslim, straight or queer. This is a strategic mode of coalition building, encouraging LGBTQ people to think of themselves as allied to other marginalized groups who in fact make up the majority of Morocco’s population; although they may feel small and alone, there are feminists, secularists, Amazigh activists, and other groups fighting for greater freedom of expression who would be natural allies of the Moroccan LGBTQ community. Queer people, ex-Muslims, and secularists may be minorities if they seem themselves as individual communities, but taken together, they form the majority. Speaking with this sort of voice (Kunreuther, 2010), from the perspective of a minority community allied to other minorities, allows queer Moroccans to think
of themselves not as uniquely marginalized and alone but as integral members of their local communities and a diverse national public.

In another example, from the “conversation” (hiwar khas) section of Issue 3, Akaliyat speaks with a gay Moroccan police officer in his thirties who goes by the pseudonym “Rachid” (Figure 4). After describing how he realized he was gay around the age of 15, his decision to join the police force in order to evade financial hardship, and the personal conflicts he faces in being responsible for enforcing a legal system that criminalizes his sexuality, he concludes his discussion by saying:

I wish all homosexuals (mithliyin) a happy and normal life, just like anyone else, and I also hope that there will come a day when society will change its opinion of homosexuality. I think this will happen through the work of your magazine and the rest of the free media outlets that are trying to improve the situation of homosexuals in our Arab nations (dakhil awtanina al-’arabiya). I also hope that your magazine continues to exist because it shines a light on an anxious class of people that, if the magazine didn’t exist, would face increasing and deepening oppression. (Akaliyat, 2015b, my translation)
We can see in this conversation an example of how Akaliyat invites its readers to understand their sexuality as well as how they should understand their relationship to the magazine. One “discovers” that they are a homosexual at a young age, as evidenced by the editor’s question to Rachid, “when did you discover that you were a homosexual?” at the beginning of the conversation (mata iktashfa annaka mithly an-jins?). One’s sexual orientation is understood to be an internal state that is an integral aspect of one’s individual identity that begins to manifest itself in childhood and adolescence, an idea which is reflective of the magazine’s reliance upon understandings of gender and sexuality based in the physiological and psychological sciences rather than on traditional Moroccan-Islamic notions of gender and sexuality that presume a socially-imbricated heterosexual subject. This question is a good example of double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, 1994), with Akaliyat employing terms drawn from medical and psychological traditions in order to teach both Rachid and its readers how they should understand their sexuality and its implications for their identity.

Furthermore, it is assumed that telling others about one’s sexuality is something that one should do after “accepting” (taqabala) and becoming “convinced” (iqtana’a) of one’s “being” (kawn) a homosexual, with the editor asking Rachid, “You are convinced of being [a homosexual] and you’ve accepted your sexual
orientation - hasn’t that convinced you to tell your family and friends about your homosexuality?” (kawnak iqtana’ta wa taqabalta mayulak al-jinsy, alam yushaja’ka hatha ‘an i’lan mithliyatak al-jinsiya li-usratak wa asdiqa’ik?). Rachid responds to this question by saying that he has only confided in his identity with one or two other gay friends because they are the only people he can trust with this potentially career-destroying information, with the implication being that he feels safe confiding in them because they could also face serious ramifications if their sexuality was made public to the wrong audience. Readers of this exchange will implicitly understand that knowledge of their homosexuality is deeply powerful and it should be revealed only to those whom they can trust completely – probably only to other queer Moroccans who also have a lot to lose and therefore understand the heavy weight of this information. While voicing one’s homosexuality is an essential aspect of coming to terms with one’s identity as a queer person, one must be very careful in deciding with whom they share this information.

Also in this exchange, Rachid (and, through his voice, Akaliyat) invites readers to be affectively invested in the success of the magazine as one of the few “free media outlets” fighting on behalf of LGBTQ people in the Arab world. Akaliyat wants its readers to be aware of the precarious financial and legal status that the magazine finds itself in and that it seeks their support. If it can show that it serves as a platform dedicated to “shining a light” upon the untold stories of oppressed people living in Morocco and the broader Arab-majority region, it can stake out a claim for itself and its mission, hopefully encouraging other queer people in its audience to share their stories as well, thereby increasing the magazine’s audience and prolonging its viability. This stance is also reflected on the magazine’s website, where a button on the sidebar announces that Akaliyat provides “your chance to make your voice heard by over 10,000 visitors a day … click here to share” (forsatak li-isma’ sawtak li-azid min 10000 za’ir yawmian … inqar hona lil-mosharika) (Figure 5).
In the third substantive textual example that I would like to address in this paper, *Akaliyat* includes a conversation with a young gay Moroccan man from the coastal city of Agadir who was blackmailed by one of his neighbors threatening to make his homosexuality public. This conversation was published in the section entitled “what happened?” (*matha hasala?*) in Issue 4 (Figure 6). The young man describes how photos showing him “in very intimate states with his ex-boyfriend ‘R’” were sent to a neighbor after he lost his cell phone one day. Three days after he lost his phone, a neighbor contacted him and told him that he had “something to return to him”: “personal photos” of himself. After agreeing to meet, the neighbor then told him “you’re really handsome” and that he would “publish the photos on the internet” if the young man did not do what he asked. Scared, the young man asked what the neighbor wanted from him and the neighbor responded by saying that he wanted him to have sex with him. Despite protesting and suggesting “other solutions,” including payment of “a sum of money,” the neighbor refused to delete the photos unless the man had sex with him. Feeling as if he had no other choice, the young man reluctantly agreed. After this incident, in which he was raped violently, he describes feeling scared, hopeless, and unable to speak. A few days later, the neighbor contacts him again and demands the same thing. Again, feeling trapped, the young man is forced to agree to sex for a second time. After being blackmailed and violently raped twice in one week, the young man reports attempting suicide three times. *Akaliyat’s* editor then asks:
Q: How were you able to escape from this state of mind?

A: After my suicide attempts, I told my friends about what happened and they helped me a lot in getting out of this state of mind. One of my friends advised me to move to a different city, and with his help I moved to that city where I still live today. (Akaliyat, 2015c, my translation)

Figure 6. Conversation with young gay man from Agadir who was blackmailed by a neighbor. From “What happened?” subsection of Akaliyat Issue 4.

In this exchange, we see Akaliyat teaching its readers how to process incidents of violence that could occur to them if their sexuality is made public against their wishes. Although one could feel desperate and alone after experiencing something as horrible as what this young man went through, Akaliyat tells its readers that it is important to reach out to friends one can trust and tell them what happened – it is critical to voice these experiences, to put them in words. Developing and relying on this network of close friends is an important strategy that queer Moroccans must use to prevent them from feeling depressed, hopeless, and suicidal. Because the state and legal institutions do not support victims of rape or sexual violence in Morocco, especially if they are queer, relying on help from friends and activist
networks like Akaliyat is vital to one’s survival as well as one’s physical and emotional wellbeing. The conversation ends on a distinctly empowering note, with the young man speaking directly to “decision makers in Morocco,” asking them, “How long will the state keep attacking homosexuals in one form or another?” “We just want to live peacefully in this country,” he says, and “we deserve protection from the state … I want to say to that neighbor [who raped me] that today I discovered that the sickness that must be cured as soon as possible is not me [as a homosexual] but you [as a rapist]” (Akaliyat 2015c, p. 23).

Conclusion

As we can see through these examples, Akaliyat magazine invites its readers to imagine themselves as a diverse community of “minorities” held together by shared political aspirations as well as affective connections. Addressing both LGBTQ people and ex-Muslims living in Morocco, Akaliyat focuses on “shedding light” upon some of the most controversial and taboo topics in Moroccan society—homosexuality and the decision not to practice Islam—that remain criminalized in the Moroccan Penal Code. Akaliyat argues that these practices are not abnormal social ills, as the Moroccan state and much of the public sees them, but rather they should be accepted and legalized in Morocco under the rubric of expanding individual freedom and freedom of expression. Although Akaliyat as an organization has distinctly secularist political leanings, it takes a neutral stance with regards to its individual readers’ relationships to Islam by publishing stories that feature the voices of both queer and trans Muslims as well as ex-Muslims of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

The many different types of interview that Akaliyat publishes function as “double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin, 1994), allowing the magazine’s readers to hear the stories of individuals who have overcome challenges in their own personal lives regarding their sexuality, gender identity, and religious beliefs at the same as giving them discursive tools for thinking about how they can address similar challenges that they may be facing in their own lives. In the absence of an official state-sponsored regime of support for “sexual and religious minorities,” these somewhat informal and network-based practices, such as building coalitions with secular-leaning institutions and relying on trusted friends for support in difficult times, represent best practices for survival in an oppressive socio-political environment. The genre of the interview in its various forms (the “guest of the issue” [daif al-’adad], “conversation” [hiwar khass], and “what happened?” [matha hasala?]) is the most important and powerful “mode of regimenting the circulation of discourse” (Bauman, 2004) that Akaliyat employs in helping its readers develop practical strategies for dealing with their sexuality, gender identity, and religious affiliation in their own lives.

In addition, by describing its readers as “sexual and religious minorities,” Akaliyat works to create a collectivity of queer people in Morocco by “assign[ing] them a certain position from which to receive [the magazine’s] address” (Barber, 1997). This framing allows LGBTQ individuals to think of themselves alongside ex-Muslims, secularists, feminists, Amazigh activists, and others who support
individual freedoms and freedom of expression as co-minorities who, when taken together, actually make up the majority of Morocco’s population. Whether or not this is true, this framing allows queer people to imagine themselves in solidarity with others and helps them think of themselves not as marginalized and hopeless individuals but rather as empowered members of a wide-ranging community. Akaliyat attempts to create a cohesive “gay community” out of the more loosely organized “homosexual sphere” that exists in Morocco (Merabet, 2014), of which Akaliyat forms one part along with groups like Aswat and MALI. Akaliyat encourages queer Moroccans to think of themselves as a community of individuals who must rely on each other for support, an interdependent network of speakers and listeners, and a minority population deserving of political rights and freedom of expression within a legal framework.

Finally, by encouraging its readers to voice their sexuality and gender identity in a public space like the magazine (Kunreuther, 2010), or at least with a trusted group of close friends, Akaliyat encourages its readers to think about their identities from a specifically queer-affirming and localized Moroccan perspective. Using the language of sexuality and gender identity borrowed from secular physiological and psychological sciences, the magazine tells its readers that sexuality is an internal and natural aspect of one’s identity that is “discovered” in one’s youth. Coming out, or “telling one’s friends and family about one’s homosexuality,” is considered an important part of one’s journey toward “acceptance” of “being” a homosexual, mirroring the predominant narrative within Western queer communities surrounding “being out” (Duggan, 2002). Akaliyat also highly encourages its readers to share their voice by contributing an article or interview to the magazine as a way to support one of the only “free media outlets” advocating for the rights of LGBTQ people in the Arab world. It frames itself as part of a vanguard of queer organizations and media outlets, such as My.Kali in Jordan, Shams and Mawjoudin in Tunisia, and Helem and Meem in Lebanon, that are working toward greater acceptance of LGBTQ issues in Arab-majority societies across the Middle East and North Africa region.

Akaliyat magazine works to create queer community in Morocco by invoking a coalition of minorities framed as interdependent co-listeners to each other’s voices. The magazine models a supportive and affirming approach to queer identities in the absence of support from the state, Moroccan medical or legal institutions, Islamic religious organizations, and many families and communities throughout the country and in the Moroccan diaspora. By sharing intimate stories about their own journeys to self-acceptance as queer people, about how they overcame difficult challenges in their lives, and about how LGBTQ people can work together alongside other “minority” communities to achieve a political system that respects individual freedoms and freedom of expression, Akaliyat magazine and its readers serve a critical role in the emergence of queer community in Morocco.

References


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