

Good evening everybody,

I first want to thank Mr Constantin for organising this meeting and also for asking me to speak. It's a very interesting topic and I am very honoured by this trust.

My name is Annick Baillieul and I am specialized in traditional dances from Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Each one of us has to limit his speech because we have to share the time we have. So I had to choose between so much aspects. I'd like to invite you to go with me in Meknes because I lived there exceptional moments.

We are at the end of the 20th century in the beginning of July. In these very warm days, Meknes celebrates the "Mouloud". This is the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet. This feast is each year on another date because it follows the Islamic calendar.

Each year it is the opportunity for the different religious brotherhoods of the region to meet each other. Meknes is mostly known for the brotherhood of the "Aïssawa's". They are linked with the saint Sidi Ben 'Issa al Kamal. You can find his mausoleum in the city. The procession I am lucky to follow is organized by a family who are followers since generations. Before the departure, the house of the cheikh is invaded by an impressive number of musicians and dancers. The dancers wear all the same tunic which makes me think of Moroccan carpets because of the fabric in wool and the warm red colour of the vertical stripes on it. It's all illuminated by sequins all over. They all wear a yellow, orange or white turban. The house is shaking because of the heavy percussion touching the hearts. The dancers, already full up in movement, bend their bust and back on the obsessive rhythm and accompanied by the "youyou" of the women.

Then it is the departure. The flagbearers go first, followed by the dancers. Then the one who carries the enormous incense burner in copper on his head occupies a very central place. Then comes the percussion and at the end the ones who are playing ghaïta on their horses. The dancers are singing: "Allah Da'im" what means "God is eternal". To the sound of drums and accompanied by the music of the ghaïta, they bend their bust in a half circle from the left shoulder to the right shoulder with a step with the right feet forward and to the right, then the

opposite on the left side. They repeat and repeat again the same movement all over the trail. The encensory is heavy and the one who is carrying it on his head can't move as the dancers but his steps are cadenced and he turns sometimes, doing its own dance to draw attention to the great symbol he is showing. Encense belongs to the ritual. According to the Moroccan mentality, all what is beautiful, all what is pleasing to the eye, to the ear or pleasant to smell bring people nearer to God. So the smell of encense should drive out the evil spirits and bring us nearer to the Master of the Universe. The procession clears a passage through the town and the narrow streets of the medina. Music and songs resonate between the walls. Sometimes it stops for dancing and singing on place. Some people on the trail join the movements and dance, swinging their head or bust on the music. At the very head of the procession, an old woman of the family is dancing also, on her own, moving her head in harmony with the other dancers. She is dressed all in white and wears a scarf tight around her bust.

The afternoon ran without realizing it. At the end our procession meet another one and the two finished the trail together.

Besides all those processions, the Mouloud is also the opportunity for different families to organize a "lila". "Lila" means "night" in arabic. This goes indeed about a nocturnal ritual which takes place according to the customs of each brotherhood. I take you with me to a lila of the "Gharbawa's". I had the great luck to be introduced to this group by the right person. Because these are very closed environments. These are private and inner gatherings. They don't like curious looks from outside. They are afraid that their old traditions would be considered as superstitious and in struggle with the science at this time of globalization. Furthermore they go against the current of the modern Islam which preaches an uniform religion where there is no place for saints, spirits or djin's, nor for old traditions coming from the pre-islamic time.

So I am finding myself between the Gharbawa's. When I arrive the evening is already started. The guests are in a circle together with the musicians, dancing what they call the "Moujarad", an introductive dance. Men and women are dancing together and I join them. They are singing and on the beat we are doing a step forward with the right feet to the middle of the circle while we relax all the body going with the movement. Then we come back and do it

again and again. The movement becomes stronger and stronger reinforced by the atmosphere and the feeling to belong to the group. At the end of the song, somebody is shouting "Ah! Si Mohamed!". And we start again with another song and other movements. We are now moving laterally. One step to the right and then one step to the left. The movements are more and more free. Everyone leaves his stress and problems to the dance. Some men are dancing in the middle and give more individual character to their dance. They are jumping or turning, as if they want to liberate themselves from the stiffness of life.

Then it becomes quiet. The following moment is dedicated to the missing persons. Alternatively some people are telling how some persons disappeared from their life, their family, their village, their group. Then people begin to cry and mourning. I feel like I am in a therapy session because the tears are real and there is a cloud of sadness hanging in the room.

A moment of praying is coming after this. Who wants can entrust an intention to the leader. The leader repeats this aloud and all the assembly sings it together. The one who is asking it gives some money to the leader who puts it in a common box. This serves for members who are in need.

Afterwards comes the most surprising moment of the night. When the music asks it, some men and women stand up for dancing. They consider themselves as Camels. Since their childhood, they know they are camels. The women go on their knees and imitate the bleating of the camel. They move agile the upperbody. The hands are on the back and they grab then their buttocks and move them on the rhythm of the music. The men keep standing making big steps laterally: one to the right and one to the left ... They keep also their hands after their back and swing their bust. They are all shouting and imitate the bleating of the camel. Then a "camel"-man goes after a "camel"-woman on her knees and there is a dance arising between them that reaches a very intimate level without touching each other. At the end of the dance they give a kiss to each other. Good to know: they are not husband and wife. Their only bond is: "camel"-man and "camel"-woman. Am I here well in Morocco, in an Islamic country where the relationship between man and woman are very strict and controlled?

Later in the night comes the dance of the lions. Again there are members of the brotherhood who consider themselves as “lions”. The women sit down on their knees and move their upper body as if they want to catch invisible preys. This time again the men remain standing up, using only little space and move mostly arms and hands. Their movements imitate attacks against the other “lions” or against the “lionesses” who reply firmly. Then a third animal is coming: a jackal. The lions attack him at once but he is playing dead in order to protect himself. Then the “lionesses” protect him too because they consider him as their son. They make him disappear between their legs. The jackal gets stiff as a board and the lionesses make him roll and disappear from the scene. At the end of the dance, the “lionesses” go lying on their back and the “lions” give them a kiss. Then the “lions” go kissing each other also. During the whole dance they imitated the roaring of the animal.

Between those animal-dances there are different other sessions of praying and tearing with songs and music.

Then another ritual is coming. People are going to sit down in a circle. Singing for Allah, they hit their chest and their thighs. Because this happens on the rhythm and because they are moving their upper body on the music we can speak of a sitting dance.

Late, very late in the night, when I don't feel the hunger anymore, a meal is coming. Everything and everybody is quiet now. No music anymore, no songs, no crying. Everybody is eating. After the meal some guests are leaving but not everybody. And, with the people who remain we do again the dance of the beginning, the “Moujarad”. This time there are some women who are dancing in solo in the middle of the circle. They put out their scarf and twirl their hair in all directions. Some are carried away by the movements and other women are supporting them so that they won't overbalance and fall on the ground. Suddenly a young woman is going into a trance and fall on the ground. People take her immediately away in another room so that she can recover. Some women who continue to twirl their hair go near to the musicians. They want to blend with the music, becoming one with it.

At the very end of the night the musicians play the “sha'bi”, this is the popular music of Morocco. Now everybody is relaxing and the night is ending with the

pleasure of dancing. Stamping the feet, shaking the shoulders, swinging the hips, laughing... this unforgettable night goes to the end by sunrise.

We go back to our residence.

After those sessions I was lucky to assist also to other ceremonies. I was also very impressed. In a lila in Sidi Ahmed, for exemple, it was not about animals but about spirits: Lalla Roquia, Lalla Malika and Lalla 'Aicha. Those are wellknown spirits in Morocco. Unfortunately time is running out and I can't speak about this today.

To finish my speech I'd like to make the connection with spirituality. During all those rituals the link between the body and the spirituality is brought to light. In what we call trance dances we let our body go, we leave it tot the Spirit. It is in this trust and release that we reach another dimension. We touch the soul and a kind of therapy where body and soul become one.

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