

Cows wrapped in skins: Eid al-Adha in Moroccan mountains

The analysis of an religious holiday among Berbers living in the High Atlas Mountains

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ABSTRACT:

The main objective of the article is to describe and analyze an Islamic religious holiday Eid al-Adha among Berbers living in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. A special attention is paid to the religious and gender context of the celebration.

KEY WORDS:

Baraka, Berbers, Eid al-Adha, gender relations, Morocco

“Bow down, O mountain, I beseech you, become a flat plain that I may reach my beloved who abides beyond!”

Old-time amorous and didactic verse

The study draws from the field notes and photographs taken during the Feast of the Sacrifice and the subsequent celebration in November 2012. The festival took place in a village called Tagadirt Ait Ali in the central High Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

The article's main objective is to document and analyze the two seemingly contradictory parts the celebration comprises of. First the ritual process, which is closely intertwined with the Islamic spiritual tradition. The article moves further to the next stage of the whole event, which features an original synthesis of Berber traditions and Islamic religion.

The whole feast will be subject to interpretation from the following perspectives: religious, social and economic aspects will be taken in the account to illustrate the changes the local community has been undergoing in the recent years.

BERBERS AND THE GREATER EID

Berbers are an ethnic group with an own dialect living mostly of farming and herding, though the time-space compression and proximity of the urban site have brought about some major shifts. The ubiquitous terraced fields connected by irrigation channels surround the villages. Owing to its exclusive position at the foot of the North African highest mountain Toubkal, the place has been slowly turned into a tourist resort with plenty of hotels, lodges and other features of tourism sector. This visible local reality represented by souvenir shops and restaurants offering tagines or couscous plates is, however, complemented by the less visible sphere of local life, which remains relatively intact and separated from the tourism sector. As we will further see, this view is only an illusion as the market economy and Western influence via multiple indirect mechanisms affect the households.

They have inhabited the locality of High Atlas for centuries since they were pushed out from the fertile coastline areas by Arabic tribes. The region used to be

independent from the outside form of rule until quite late. During the short period of French dominance (the French Protectorate in Morocco lasted 1912-1956) the administration officers only succeeded in subjugating the interior regions in the mid-thirties. It was due to the geographic isolation that the tribes operated in the territory formerly known as siba. The term indicates political and administrative dissidence of Berber tribes on the central government. It is a territory, which was not subjected to an outside power and its inhabitants therefore did not pay taxes to the sultan¹⁾ (see Gellner 1969).

Tagadirt Ait Ali lies in a close distance (about two hours by car) to Marrakesh. Facing the West, one can almost feel the noise of the bustling city. Marrakesh used to be an economic and cultural metropolis since the Middle Ages, when the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties made it their residence. It had also ranked among the four former imperial cities.

To the east, the view opens up to the snow capped peaks dotting the horizon at an altitude of 3000 and sometimes even 4000 meters. Its shadows cast over the dozens of villages, which will become in the next days a center of a great performance. Or as the locals say in Tashelhit (one of the three dialects of the Berber language spoken in Morocco) with an occasional Arabic, French and English terms, it will hold the most important feast of the year.

Eid al-Adha (or as Moroccans usually refer Eid al-Kabir which translates into English as “the Greater Eid”) is a Muslim festival of an utmost importance. It commemorates a sacrifice prophet Ibrahim was willing to execute on his son Ismail as an act of submission to Allah. According to Quran, the moment the sacrifice was about to be carried out, God stopped Ibrahim and instead of executing a human, he ordered to kill a lamb. Every year Muslims all over the world commemorate the incident by sacrificing animals; sheep, goats and rams. Therefore, the occasion bears strong religious connotations.

In the Moroccan interior inhabited by Berber population, however, the first religious-ritual part devoted to contemplation, family reunions and neighbors' visits is succeeded by a second stage. The following phase constitutes a counterpart to the former religiously moderate atmosphere. A few young men disguise themselves in goat skins and accompanied by their peers, they set off to the hollow

sounds of drums for the walk around the village. This march extrapolates the serious ambient of the day before.

Eid al-Adha or Feast of the Sacrifice in the High Atlas interior is succeeded by a regional specific variation on the traditional course of the holiday. It is a fine example of syncretism of an Islamic faith with the local cultural features it incorporated. As a significant attribute of the Berber folklore can be considered animal creatures bearing anthropomorphic traits. At this point, it is worth mentioning a character called „Bilmounouazen“, a woman of animalistic features dressed in skins, whose position in the local folklore tradition can be loosely compared to Lady Middy scaring children in Slavic mythology. It is rather curious that a very similar term is reserved for one of the central characters of the Eid al-Adha celebration where it actually plays a central role.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE AND PRAYERS

The Imlil valley is inhabited by about seven thousand people. There is a local primary school and a medical center. It is run by a support of an English entrepreneur who owns a luxury hotel made of a former kasbah²⁾. The central spot at the lowest point of the valley had spontaneously turned in a parked lot, which locals familiarly call “Garage”. The main road is surrounded by groceries and numerous restaurants. On the ninth day of Dhu al-ijjah, the twelfth month in the Islamic calendar, everything is upside down, though the village never loses its calm and laid-back vibe occasionally interrupted by roosters and muezzin's voice. Tomorrow will be the day of commencement of Eid al-Adha.

The arrangements for the festival are taken very seriously by both men and women. Despite ongoing socio-cultural changes, the households as productive and reproductive units remain the cornerstones of the local reality. The distinction between the outdoor and indoor world reflects the space divided accordingly to gender. While a house is an image of a female world; a village reflects an utterly male sphere. These spacious standards also serve as pillars of an Islamic sexual order, which does not allow for contacts between unmarried women and men. The symbolic behavioral patterns encompassing sexuality mirror the order of hierarchy and allocation of power. The spatial borders divide the society in two halves: male universe and female universe; the spatial separation based

on gender is articulated in the physical separation of public sphere from private area. As Mernissi points out in her analysis on dynamics of the modern Muslim society, one of the distinct features of the Muslim sexuality is the territoriality, which reflects the specific labor division and concept of society and power. It is the spatial configuration, which serves as a base for social status, tasks and authority (Mernissi 1987: 169).

Following these patterns, men and women have to carry out a set of tasks. The most important is to obtain a ram, which will be used in the next days as a sacrifice. Muslims consider a sacred duty to acquire a sheep. It is a male task to get one. The offer of these animals obeys market rules, therefore the prices are increasing as the feast is approaching. In the High Atlas region it is hard especially for not well-off population, which does not participate in the monetary economy to accumulate enough funds allowing the purchase. A considerably big sheep can be valued up to 2200 Moroccan dirhams (200EUR/260 USD). During my first fieldwork stay I stayed by a family, which made part of their income by an occasional engagement in the tourism sector. At the end of my trip I paid the landlord a decent sum of money for the local conditions. He immediately spent it on the next day trip to Marrakesh on festive garment and necessary paraphernalia for the whole family. The economic aspects impacting families can be also traced in the policies of banks. They have come up with special Eid al-Adha loans up to 5000 dirhams at 10-15% interests (Alarabiyane, 13 December 2007).

Talking about the economic aspect of the festival, it is also necessary to consider the spending on new clothes for all the family members. The end of my second long-term stay was also affected by the preparations for the coming celebration. My friend/translator/guide spiced our working trips to the neighboring towns with peeking into shops trying to buy “some fancy clothes” for his wife and two little children. This rule of purchasing something new is observed as a must and also serves to confirm the social status of families. As sociology professor at Rabat University suggests, “Many Moroccans no longer observe the Feast of Sacrifice from a religious perspective, but rather from a social perspective”. (Bihmidine 2012).

While the men's responsibility is to obtain the outdoor necessities, women devote their time to general cleaning including pot polishing, washing and

¹⁾ The concept of siba and makhzen played an important role in the country's past. Generally speaking, makhzen demarcated a territory under the control of central power. Siba constituted its counterpart. The history of Morocco is sometimes interpreted as a dialectic process between the siba and makhzen territory (for more on siba and makhzen see Hart (1972) and Gellner (1972). It is important to add that siba is not exclusively ascribed to Berbers, but it is a rural phenomenon, where Berbers played a key role (Duclos, 1972: 219).

²⁾ A fortress typical for the North African region occupied by the local leader. In the wartime or when the village was under attack, it served as a defense and a hide out to villagers.

- rug cleaning. The division of roles fixes the existing order even during the preparation phase.

EID AL-ADHA

Early morning, the open door policy is launched. It has to do a lot with the overall Muslim value of hospitality. Oxford University expedition, which explored Morocco in the 50's of the 20th century noticed that hospitality towards visitors constitutes truly a Moroccan way of life, that people would welcome everyone equally warmly as they did them (Clarke 1959: 124). Generosity definitely constitutes one of the basic elements of Arab world. This approach is engaged in treating guests of the house as well as visitors. The epitome of the host is the man who can entertain many people and distribute his bounty graciously. This links him ultimately to Allah, who is the source of bounty. On the other hand, the need for exchange and reciprocity in an egalitarian society is highly desired to reach balance (Rabinow 2007: 48).

The village becomes lively shortly after eight in the morning. The tables are covered with saucers full of nuts, almonds, sweet cookies, pancakes, tea and coffee pots. Everyone puts on their best clothes; older women dress traditional robes, some of the younger wear pajamas, which are a current hot trend. Habitually, men dress up in casual clothes like pants and shirts. On this occasion, everyone puts on a djellaba³⁾ and some men even underline their eyes using kohl⁴⁾. In the ancient times, kohl was believed to protect eyes from sunrays and served as prevention against ailments. One of my friends told me that men paint their eyes just like prophet and his family used to do. Women decorate their hands with floral and geometric ornaments of henna. Neighbors visit each other the whole morning before the call for prayer is executed. After the male population pays a visit to the mosque, both men and women (mostly around 30-40 years of age, younger generation stays at home and does not join) climb up the Eastern slope of a hill to form two separate circles. The private - public separation or male and female division is hereby reflected in the spatial division at the sermon.

Family gatherings including offers of festive food to everyone who enters can be observed as an alteration to the ancient rule that invitation has to be paid back just like "politeness" (Mauss 1967). The communal character of living is repeatedly reconstituted and confirmed via sharing food, work and ceremonies. Cooperation and mutual help is highly valued among the mountain Berbers; hospitality is another articulation of the principles of solidarity and care with an emphasis on strengthening the relationships.

As Crapanzano (1985: 81) points out, "the maintenance of the relationship is given greater value than the immediate goal sought through the relationship". The interpersonal aspect is also highly emphasized at business deals. The long discussion between seller and buyer including drinking and eating can take up to hours to dispute over the price of goods. In the process, the interpersonal relations are subordinate to relations of obligation (Eikelman 1976: 144), which is the utmost maxim of Moroccan society. In other words, relations are continually negotiated and renegotiated (Rabinow 1975).

Imam delivers a sermon (khutbah) which is observed by the spatially distanced men and women. This year the sermon is dedicated to Otherness and its

appreciation. It gives a lesson on treating others and dealing with people from different countries. Lately it stresses the importance of a fair treatment of people of different color, family background. The imam's speech up in the clouds with encircling mountain peaks makes the performance look impressive.

I cannot say whether the topic of the sermon has been chosen due to my presence in the village. Likely it interfered as I stood in the center of attention facing the curious grins and sometimes warm sometimes less warm smiles and greetings of everyone. I was repeatedly told that this year's Eid would be a special one. In the village, it is not usual that outsiders would join. I was informed that besides me - a European woman, there was a Swedish woman living in the village a long time ago. Since locals have a very vague approach to time and measurement methods in general, it is almost impossible to say when this happened.

The sermon took up to an hour and was intermittently interrupted by choral chanting. It was held in classical Arabic, which made it hardly comprehensible for many⁵⁾.

Berbers come in touch with Arabic only when dealing with local authorities, administration or Arabic population of Marrakesh. The Berber dialects were not recognized as an official language in Morocco for long until some twenty years⁶⁾. Even these days it has not won the battle for the overall acceptance and recognition within the Arabic milieu. Furthermore, the women of Tagadirt Ait Ali often have a shaky knowledge of both Modern Standard Arabic and Moroccan Arabic. This is owing to the schooling conditions in the region where women were traditionally more inclined to stay in the private sphere, and thus not having opportunities to practice the foreign language. Another reason can be seen in their absence from the formal education process. The generation of women of 25 years and older is often not literate. A peek in the classroom of a local primary school shows the unbalanced gender ratio, which does not reflect the proportion between sexes in the village.

The different attitude towards the religious ceremony is noticeable among the population which resettled in the urban areas and among youths, who show a degree of reluctance toward the participation in the sermon. Their engagement is often formal and passive. The distance they maintain from their parents' traditions is in a sharp contrast with an eager enthusiasm the youth exhibit toward the active participation in the profane part.

Upon the return to their houses, family members start with preparations for the sheep slaughtering. This is a responsibility of the male head of the family, who ritually cuts through the ram's throat. With the help of his sons, he is holding the animal tight until it bleeds to death. Later, it is hung on prepared hooks, the guts are taken out, the animal is flayed. The first part consumed is liver and pieces of fat prepared as brochettes. All the animal parts are successively consumed in a span of a few days. Nothing of the slaughtered animal is in vain. Even the flayed goat skins are collected by children to be used as a costume the following morning.

COWS GRANTING BARAKA

The state of liminality and opting out from the constraints of everyday life has been in the center of attention of numerous social scientists (See e.g. van

Sheep slaughtering is a responsibility of the male head of the family, who ritually cuts through the ram's throat

Gennep (1960), Turner (1969). Van Gennep stated that rites, studied and analyzed in the larger setting of the cultures they pertained to, could illuminate our knowledge of the culture as well as provide understanding of more general processes of cultural evolution.

The ritual behavior can be described as formalized, social and symbolic. In the following lines, we will describe and analyze an event, which is specifically bounded to the region. It draws from the religious background, but in a way also reflects the specific configurations of interpersonal relations, relations to land and symbolic values of High Atlas Berbers. The four days lasting performance offers an insight in the cultural values and ideas reflecting the basis of their worldview. Last but not least, the whole practice serves as an important tool to maintain social cohesion and sense of identity.

At nightfall of Eid al-Adha two young men used to perform a show. They were sketches drawing from agricultural themes. The actors acted like cows imitating plowing. The sole objective was to raise amusement among the audience. These agricultural connotations and symbolic behavior referring to humans cultivating soil support the notion of the importance of fields and agriculture in the locals' lives. In the harsh climate conditions in the mountains, the fruitful soil of the terraced fields is vital for survival. Berbers do not usually consume a lot of meat besides the festive occasions. Vegetable tagine or are usually served.

The production of potatoes, tomatoes, peppers and greens needed to be kept as high as possible to feed large families. The fertile soil was, thus, highly desired in order to secure survival. Nowadays, many people buy these goods at the souqs - weekly markets, and the importance of crop has declined.

The original single show developed in the contemporary tradition of a performance which entails a religious message as well as normative aspects to regulate social behavior. A few young men are wrapped in goat skins left from the previous day to act in a performative part of the celebration. The untanned⁷⁾ goatskin is tightly sewn up on the men's bodies; their heads are crowned with the goat heads with cut out gaps for eyes to see. The man who undergoes such transformation in a goat shed with an assistance of his male peers is for the rest of the day called Tamogait'n'bilmaoun. The first word

refers to "cow", the second means "person with skins". A discrepancy is noted here since the young men dress up in goat skins. It is likely that the animals slaughtered at Eid al-Adha are goats, therefore the skins available are used.

The character as well as his companions is termed in compliance with the original narration. It states that Bilmaouns are accompanied by a man with a face painted in black. He represents Bilal (Bilal ibn Rabah), companion of the prophet Muhammad. In Islamic religious tradition, this Ethiopian of Habesha origin and a freed slave plays a key role. Bilal granted with beautiful voice belonged among the trustworthy and loyal companions of Muhammad. He is often quoted as the proof of pluralism and racial equality at the advent of the Islamic religion. The figure of Bilal conveys the message of acceptance regardless nationality, and color of skin. In the African context, this aspect is highly stressed due to the devotion to faith. Another character is a girl, who is usually featured by a disguised man. The girl's name is Tiaazza, which literally means "other people like her"⁸⁾. The former character - Bilal - acts as her protector. Upon touch Tiaazza is virtually abducted and other characters of the show wander from house to house in order to find her and punish her kidnappers. The march is accompanied by a group of musicians playing the little round drums. These are called talount and appear in two sizes. The few leaders of the musicians possess drums of a bigger size making strong rumbling sounds. The rest then uses small round drums sounding more softly. These participants joined by fellow villagers walk through the village and in the sounds of music visit houses in order to find the lost pretty girl. In each house they are offered small meals such as walnuts, sweet mint tea, and perform a short music gig. The closed doors are broken in to investigate whether the girl is kept there.

Drawing from the narration, it is obvious that being considered likeable in Berber society implies that people want to enjoy a full possession of such a person; woman in this case. Therefore she is subject to kidnapping. Men chase her and "try to steal her"⁹⁾. Some twenty years ago¹⁰⁾ another character in a mask - Lhzane, which means "Jew", used to be present. His function rested in scaring children away and thus keeping them away from disturbing the drum players. In Morocco, the traditional sociocultural stereotypes of man and woman divide the world between male

⁷⁾ The skins are often full of fleas and other parasites, thus a proper hamam bath at the end of the day is a must.

⁸⁾ Here I am using the literal expression of my friend, who provided me a description of this part of the feast.

⁹⁾ Here I am using a literal expression of my friend.

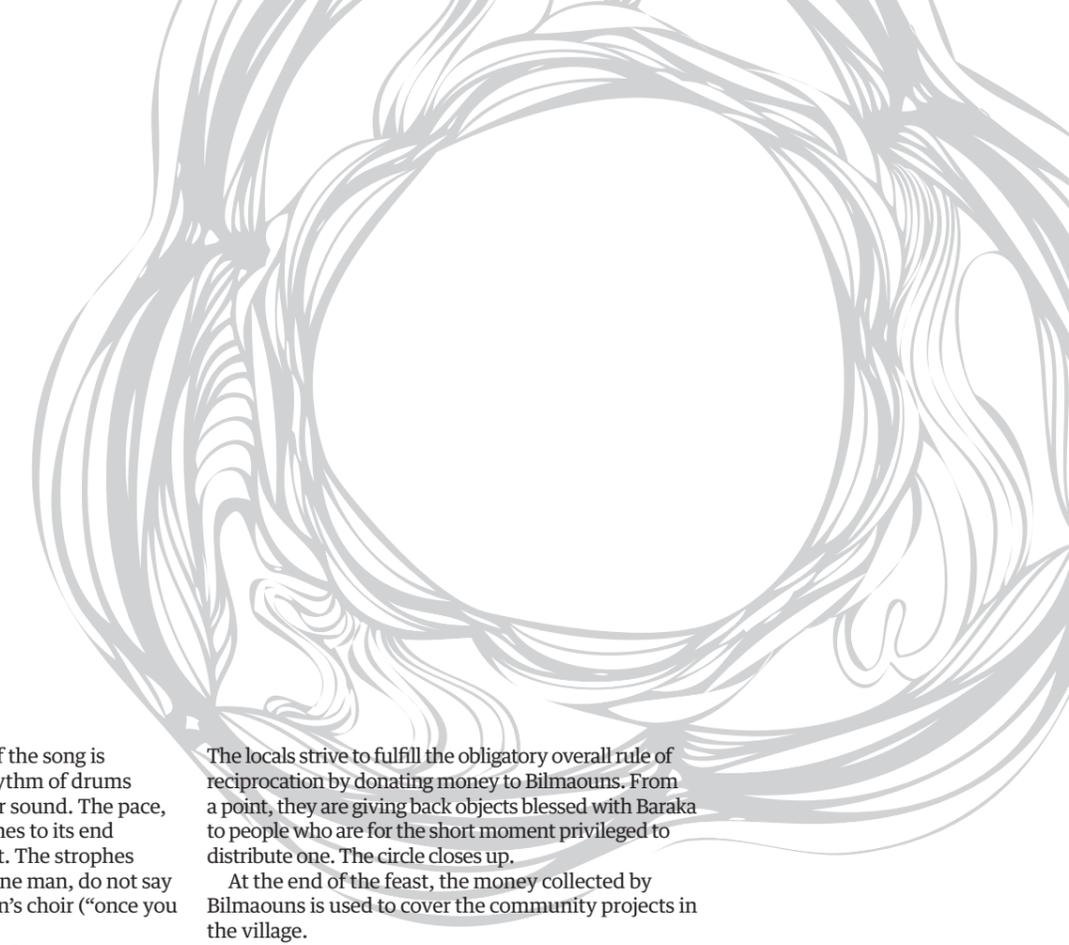
¹⁰⁾ The time indications should be taken with regard to the fact that the locals employ them in a very vague manner. They do not often conceptualize the world in terms of temporal frames and quantification.

³⁾ Yellow and white colors are preferred.

⁴⁾ An ancient eye cosmetic, in Arabic from the Accadian word for cosmetic.

⁵⁾ Arabic is taught at local primary schools. Only a minority of people of older generation though went through schooling process, therefore they are not familiar with this version of Arabic, which differs from the commonly spoken Moroccan Arabic - derija. This concerns especially women.

⁶⁾ Tamazight was recognized as an official language only in 1994.



The character of Bilal, black emancipated slave symbolizing the overall need for mutual respect and recognition among people is complemented with an utterly negative character represented by Jew

- ▶ and female. They are symbols of opposition and conflict (Crapanzano 1977). Whilst the utilitarian function of the two goats is to keep musicians together and attract some other fellows, their symbolic function rests upon granting protection to “miss popular” Lhazza.

According to the description a great controversy appears. The character of Bilal, black emancipated slave symbolizing the overall need for mutual respect and recognition among people is complemented with an utterly negative character represented by Jew. Since Jew is not understood as a mere “ethnic” category, but also religious, this engagement shows strong religious connotations where exclusion is applied to subscribers to another faith.

The show is partly based on the religious characters, which are adapted to the local conditions and completed by the two local personalities taken from the local environment.

RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

Besides scaring off curious children, Tamogaits, the goatskin (in Tashelhit bngri) persons walk with tied up hooves of killed animals, which they use for a considerably brutal beating off the villagers. Though often painful, the adults should not flee to escape the hurtful bangs since they are believed to transmit Baraka.

The phenomenon of Baraka in Islamic milieu stands for divinity and spiritual power granted by God in the form of blessing. This transcendental and spiritual wisdom can be possessed by both people and objects. According to Gellner (1969) the religious authority of marabouts, saint men of the Atlas Mountains contributes to the social equilibrium in the area. In Berber dialect, marabout or agurram is a person granted with authority and charisma deriving from Baraka. He acts as an intermediary between segmented societies.

“The saints can be understood as symbolic interpretive elements. They are the complex symbols through which, under certain circumstances, the Moroccans ... articulate their experience of reality. They are not simple figures of allegory but complex symbols with rich associative auras. They have both sociocultural and personal-psychological referents. Insofar as these symbolic-interpretive elements are part of a system, they are subject to the logical

constraints and evaluations of that system, and they serve to structure and evaluate (the articulated) experience.” Crapanzano (1985: 75)

The possession of Baraka is highly desired; in the context of Eid al-Adha no one opposes the way to grasp his share via people who do not belong for the course of the subsequent days to the human realm, but transcended to the animal sphere. The experience of transition allows them to gain these supernatural powers. The animal creatures opt out from the rules of the everyday life hence they can bring the powerful spiritual blessing, which is generally reserved for saint men. Their costumes link them directly to natural world out of reach of the religious doctrine separating the rational human world from the wild and incomprehensible realm of nature.

Nature in the mountains, however, always was and despite the penetration of neoliberal market imperatives still remains a *conditio sine qua non* of survival. It is also a constitutive aspect of one’s identity, which is constantly re-established. In this perspective, it is quite unique, that the utterly spiritual form reserved for God and saint men is vested in the creatures of nature, which on top with their vigorous and violent performative acts confirm their affiliation to the irrational world. Tamogaits, therefore, represent cows, which were connecting the human-cultural sphere with nature. Baraka in this case, is confirmed and negotiated through action.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Family law in Morocco is still subject to religious rules, adultery (*zina*) can be penalized by law, and labor division reflects gender. It is manifested in cooking, housework and child care. Likewise, the gender division is obvious in the way the whole festival - and even more significantly its second part - is performed. The village march is completed solely by men. Inside each house, young men form a half circle which is closed by a group of young girls, who start reciting lyrics of a song. After the finished strophe, the men sing in reply. The song serves a communication channel between the two poles of the society, male and female. These are usually split, and allowed to join only under special circumstances like this feast. The ancient love songs are sung by young people.

The dialogic relationship is spatially articulated by the closed up circle their bodies mark in the land.

The usually simple repetitiveness of the song is exaggerated by the monotonous rhythm of drums heated in the flames to give stronger sound. The pace, however, speeds up as the song comes to its end and becomes more and more urgent. The strophes chanted by men (“Oh please medicine man, do not say anything”) are responded by women’s choir (“once you find green tea in a glass pot”).

These ritual symbols, dances, circle formation and singing as Nancy Munn (1973) suggests, “release the relevant shared meanings embedded in the cultural code ... they provide “external templates for inner experience” that “work back” on that experience. The rituals are aimed at adjusting internal orientations to objective social processes and reality” (Crapanzano 1980: 82).

These and simple verses alike are repeated over and over for a couple of minutes. When the night falls, young people gather at a spacious outdoor area, light a big fire, and go on singing until late at night. This time, the dialogue between a woman and a shaman who advises her not to taste the green pepper was a peak of the night.

The crackling noise of an old yet powerful mobile phone playing a pop music song echoes in the background where a small group of boys perform an alternative/urban version of Eid al-Adha.

As noted above, objects can possess Baraka as well as people. Moroccans believe that money has Baraka, too. In the modern context, participation in monetary economy is an everyday reality for everyone. As Crapanzano notes, “persons who exchange with each other are called *shab*, companions, associates, friends (Crapanzano 1985: 79).

The locals strive to fulfill the obligatory overall rule of reciprocity by donating money to Bilmaouns. From a point, they are giving back objects blessed with Baraka to people who are for the short moment privileged to distribute one. The circle closes up.

At the end of the feast, the money collected by Bilmaouns is used to cover the community projects in the village.

RESUME

The “Bilmaoun festival” allows their participants release from the constraints of everyday life as it puts them outside the social time. Despite the celebration has not been significantly affected by neither colonization nor modernization, we can conclude that it is slowly losing its religious importance whilst the social function of the ritual is growing on importance.

Taking everything into consideration, both Eid al-Adha and Bilmaoun festival are becoming more importantly an occasion of socializing and strengthening the mutual social ties.

The way the mountain Berbers celebrate them reflects the order of a society which is to a high degree fragmented according to gender. The performative actions (dancing, singing) confirm the existing gender polarization and contribute to the identity construction. On the other hand, the situation of a man transformed into an animal (Tamogait n’Bilmaoun) proves the fragility and instability of human roles, which are subject to voluntary and also involuntary change. ●

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