Spirits in Morocco

The evolution of the belief in spirits in Morocco as an aspect of cultural assimilation

By Anas Farah
A look into the history of Morocco is sufficient to see how the country has a rich folklore. Different civilizations conquered the country and left their footprints in the lifestyle, practices and beliefs of the natives. This cross-cultural diversity is visible in the Moroccan folklore and is an aspect of the cultural assimilation the country lived. This paper is dealing with the belief of saints and Spirits (Jinns) in Morocco as a case study of cultural assimilation. Even though many countries believe in spirits and saints, Morocco is an interesting case because of the complexity and the evolution of the belief. The purpose of this paper is to show that the belief in spirits and saints in Morocco is a consequence of a cultural assimilation of the Arabo-Islamic culture and traditions, the pre-Islamic beliefs and the African or sub-Saharan healing music.

The pre-Islamic Beliefs

The first natives of Morocco were probably animistic. The belief in the powers of natural elements like rocks, seas, rivers, trees, animals forms the basis and the foundation of what is going to become a belief in spirits through a process where those natural elements and animal symbols are going to be linked to people and beliefs coming from the Arab Peninsula and the African regions.

According to Robertson Smith, the origin of the belief in spirits is found in animal totems that evolved to more complex beliefs and become what’s called spirits. The first civilizations living in North Africa - Morocco included - were animistic and totemic and therefore natural elements like rivers, forest, seas and rocks had a prominent place in the beliefs of the natives of Morocco during the Pre-Islamic period. Moreover, this totemic dimension of the beliefs of the first Moroccans suggests that the importance of animal symbols is visible from the links animals like dogs, cats and snakes developed with spirits.

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and saints later on. For Issach Ben Ami, while the animals are related to the totems of the pre-Islamic era, natural forces and their link to the saints and spirits is related to the first animistic beliefs the natives of Morocco had:

The veneration of Lalla Taqerquzt by both Jews and Muslims is the result of a process that took place in several stages, the first of which was effected by the Berber cult of homage to water sources and reptiles. Long ago, when Jews first settled in North Africa, they accepted such cults willingly. When Islam was forced on the Berbers, however, they refused to dispeard ancient traditions. (Issach p. 162)

Later on, the animistic beliefs and the animal totems will merge with Islamic beliefs and create a cultural assimilation in which Islamic beliefs had to adapt to those totems and animistic symbols and the importance given to places like rivers and seas and trees previously had to be linked to some kind of religious belief, thus they were linked to saints and spirits leading to the creation of a complex belief in spirits where the spirit isn’t the only thing that should be worshiped but any object that relates to it.

Douttéé considers that this aspect of animistic beliefs is visible through the way some famous object have been worshiped and even given names²:

Douttéé sees that surviving traces of ancient cultic reverence for stones, caves, springs, trees, and so forth, that preceded Islamification, after which certain of the objects were given the names of Muslim saints. Vestiges of ancient rituals may still be found today: at the site of saint’s grave some natural element may be more revered than the saint’s grave some natural element may be more revered than the

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saint, as is the three called sidi abd en-nbi near the sanctuary of sidi ahmed el amri

(Issach )

The second aspect of the cultural assimilation of pre-Islamic beliefs concerns the Judaism. Tough Judaism wasn’t successful in setting himself as a dominant religion in Morocco the beliefs in Judaism influenced to some degree the way the Islamic beliefs were going to be adopted to the special context of Morocco. The Judaism was the first monotheist religion to be forced to adapt to the characteristics of the animistic beliefs and therefore it had acquired some of the totems and animistic ideas that become linked to the Jews saints and spirits. Later on with the rise of Islam in Morocco, the Jews saints were getting famous amongst the Muslims, a lot of those Saints and spirits were supposed to be Muslim saints and spirits in the belief of the Moroccans; therefore, we can say that Judaism was involved in transferring those animistic beliefs and totems to the Islamic belief later on. Issach Ben Ami argues that the similarities between the way the Muslims and the Jews worship the spirits and the saints are numerous, in fact the number of Muslims that worship Jews Saints and Spirits is huge: Moroccan’s Worship more than 100 Jews saints\textsuperscript{3}, much of those Jews spirits and saints were transformed into Muslim spirits, and an analysis of the names of the spirits reveals they are originally Jewish.

The African Healing Music

The next major influence in the evolution of the nature of the belief in spirits and saints in Morocco is the African healing music. The Gnawa are a group of musician and spirit possession healers that are largely known in Morocco, they are originally from the sub-

Saharan and African regions, the trans-Saharan trade brought them to Morocco from countries like Sudan, Nigeria, Niger, Guinea and Mali etc. Groups in those countries like the Songhay and the Bori were already known for their healing ceremonies, where the African spirits like Bambara and Fulani and Hausa were worshiped. The Gnawa implemented some of the Islamic beliefs and practices into their music and ceremonies, for example it was usual to see them repeating words of worship toward God and his Prophet Muhammad, this integration of the Islamic practices was probably a result of their contact with the Sufis who also used to sing songs worshiping God and his prophet Muhammad. Deborah Kaplan argues that “the predominant influence of Sufism and saint worship that characterizes Moroccan Islam has become part of Gnawa ritual”, the best example is the Sufi Sidi Abdelkader Jilani, the Master of the Maghreb Saints, who became one of the most respected and worshiped saints in the Gnawa tradition. But even though the Gnawa adapted some Islamic practices and beliefs, they didn’t break the link with their African roots, since the names of the African spirits Bambara, Fulani and Hausa were still present in their songs. For Deborah Kaplan that was a way for the Gnawa to reinforce and remember their link to their African roots and show their worship to the African Spirits:

The Gnawa Lila or ritual ceremony is one context where at least the names of sub-Saharan spirits and ancestors are preserved. The repetition of these African names – Baba Madani, Fulani, Busunana, Malgatu, Mamario- is one way that links with the a sub-Saharan past are remembered and commemorated. They are ulad al-Bambara, the sons of Bambara. Vocalizing the names of the ancestors both honors

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and invokes them, preserving their memory by acknowledging their presence in history and in the ritual present. (Kaplan)

Some of the most famous spirits amongst the Gnawa group, Lalla Mira, Lalla Aicha, Sidi Mimun are usually related to places like rivers or sea that’s probably a belief that merged with the Gnawa’s traditions and belief through a process of cultural assimilation of the new spirit beliefs that originated from animistic pre-Islamic beliefs.

The Arabo-Islamic influence

In the Islamic tradition the spirits or “ginns” are creatures that lived in earth before the creation of humans, they are also judged based on their actions and some of them will be sent to heaven, others to hell. The Islamic beliefs reinforce the belief of Moroccans in spirits in two other ways directly driven from the Coran texts; the first one is that the spirits or “ginns” are created from fire and the second one is that they burned by comets when they try to reach heaven:

It seems quite probable that the idea expressed in the Koran that the g’inn were created of smokeless fire was derived from the strange phenomenon of ignis fatuus, which the present-day Arabs, like the Moors, believe to be lighted by ginn. The superstition with regard to a falling star finds support in some texts of the Koran, according to which the ginn listen at the gate of heaven for scraps of the knowledge of futurity, and, when detected by the angels, are driven off, and pelted with shooting star (Westermarck p. 261)

With the Arabo-Islamic influence, the belief in spirits evolved substantially. The spread of Islamic and Arab culture added new components to the belief in spirits. They became part of

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tribes like humans do, they have their kings and rulers and they resembled humans in many aspects; In fact they were even able to have sexual intercourses with humans, a belief that’s probably coming from the Arab tales says Westermarck. Before this rising and spread of Islamic and Arabic influence the spirits were most of the time powerful creatures that were more individualized⁷, they had names and they were known for being able to achieve and do several supernatural things, but the Arabo-Islamic belief killed the individuality of the spirits⁸, this doesn’t mean that people stopped believing in spirits like Aicha Kendisha or Lalla Mira, but it was more common to call a spirit “jinn” without any reference to the name or the place where the spirit is said to be linked to. Another aspect of this transformation in the nature of belief in spirits is that the spirits transformed from creatures that are in a high spiritual rank to creatures that are in a low spiritual rank, mostly because they can be defeated with Quran. And that’s one of the most important transformations in the nature of the belief in spirits; the Islamic or Arab jinn can be extracted from the body through the recital of verses of Quran, while the spirits in the Gnawa tradition like Lalla Mira and Aisha Kendisha are impossible to defeat or to extract from a human body, in fact resisting or trying to extract them is only going to bring bad deeds for the possessed, instead, the spirit should see all his desires fulfilled and in ceremonies like the Lila and the man who is possessed should see in his possession a good sign because he was chosen to be possessed which is a privilege in itself and is a form of spiritual protection⁹. The spirit in the pre-Islamic era was powerful, protective to the body it was possessing, but with the Islam rise in Morocco the spirit became a non powerful object easily defeated by reciting verses of Quran and that had no chance to possess the body of the


man with strong faith\textsuperscript{10}. The belief in the spirits like Aisha Kendisha and Lalla Mira and other spirits didn’t disappear but was reduced substantially. The only people who believed in individualized spirits at that time were the Gnawa followers and the people living near local saint’s sanctuaries and spirit places.

The nature of the belief in spirits and saints in Morocco evolved because of the cross cultural interactions and the cultural diffusion of some beliefs into the others, which is a visible aspect of how cultural assimilation can led to substantial changes in the beliefs of a community. The evolution of the belief also reflects to some extent the way some communities have pre-established conditions to accept some beliefs than the others, the case of Morocco is really interesting because the country has pre-established beliefs in spirits and made it easy for example to African and Islam-Arabic ideas to diffuse, but what’s also interesting is how the animistic beliefs and the totemic symbols and even the fear from dark places was able to persist and live for years without being erased. This evolution reflects how one belief changes the other one instead of erasing it completely and it also reflects how some specific belief might have profited from the pre-established belief to easily spread between people by giving them the ability to have a control over the spirits in the case of Islam for example.

Works Cited:


