

Narratives of Cultural Encounters Revisited: Moroccan Entertainers beyond Borders (1840-1920)

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Abstract : This paper discusses the reordering and reorientation Moroccan Oossified and frozen histories in national and colonial archives. It attempts to reexamine Moroccan non-canonical voices beyond borders, their forgotten experiences and itineraries, with the aim of uncovering cultural discourses pertaining to early cultural and artistic interactions between Morocco and the western countries, namely Britain and America. In fact, less attention has been given to the presence of Moroccan entertainers beyond borders in the archives of history. Moroccan historians and cultural critics seem to have paid little critical consideration to Moroccan artistic encounters with the west, Europe and America as a case in point. They have overlooked to deal with travel performances, professional entertainments, and artistic spectacles, initiated by acrobats, as instances of visual cross-cultural encounters between Morocco and the west. The narratives of these professional artists have hardly found their ways into historiographical writing. This contribution attempts to locate the contesting beginnings of Moroccan professional entertainers in western show business in the nineteenth century which witnessed intricate artistic, discursive and cultural junctures by emphasizing connections between theatrical performances, ethnic exhibition and world fair expositions. Moroccan professional performances grew in Europe and America within a zealous context marked by the rise of a paradigmatic racial consciousness that sought to authenticate and legitimate ethnic discourses of power and exclusion. The ethnic taxonomies and racial hierarchies governed by ethnographic and anthropological documentation fueled up entertainment venues and popular theatrical performances and helped in developing a distinctive view about Self and Other paradigms. Moroccan travelers started their journeys to visit European and American countries to exhibit their acrobatics acts. They, in a certain sense, continued, albeit in varying degrees and circumstances, the whole tradition of travel initiated previously by their ancestor diplomats and ambassadors. Professional entertainers embarked on daring journeys across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic to discover new geographies and cultural spaces, and perform their spectacles beyond borders. These travelers left rich archival documents that reflect important cultural and historical moments. The routes of travel started from the margins of the empire towards metropolitan centers of nineteenth century Europe and America included Moroccan women travelers as acrobats and dancing professional artists as well. These also crossed the straits of Gibraltar and journeyed through the Atlantic Ocean to visit western countries. Moroccan women travelers took part in various Euro-American theatre performances and in circus shows as early as 1850 according to newspapers archives and passengers shipping lists. Najat Amburg, Zahar Ben Tahar, Torquia, Fadma, and many more whose names are now lost to us, moved freely in various western capital cities to entertain nineteenth century western audiences.

Keywords : archives, cultural encounters, self and other, Morocco, travel, Moroccan acrobats, Moorish dancing women

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