

Tahar Ben Jelloun: The Suture

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Part I: Fez and Patrimony

Fez, in part due to the existence of the Quaraouiyine and in part because of the role Fez played in the independence movement, has become a mythic and organizing space of Moroccan national identity. Ben Jelloun's novel *La prière de l'absent* can be read in light of this unifying myth of Fez as cultural origin and geo-political center. In his novel *Talismano*, Abdelwahab Meddeb remarks on the hegemonic ideological presence Fez extends upon the Moroccan space. Meddeb writes: "...une cité comme Fez, celle qui étend par coutume son hégémonie sur le territoire national, tendant à centraliser, à annuler les différences, à incorporer les bougeoisies des autres régions et villes, Souss, Taфраout, Tétouan, Taroudant, Marrakesh la récalcitrante, en un projet commun et cohérent facilitant l'exploitation de l'ensemble des corps..." (Meddeb 1987:50). In his fiction and essays, Meddeb gives a vertiginous concentration of spaces in a style that produces an urban hub for a wheel of many ethnic spokes. In contrast, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel presents the city of Fez as a purified and identifiable home. I will be looking at Ben Jelloun's literary representation of Fez in *La prière de l'absent* and analyzing the ideological ground of his representation. The representation of tradition and Moroccan history will be shown to be informed by a "patrimonialist" relation to the home space of Fez.

The novel's title, *La prière de l'absent* is a translation of an Arabic appellation (*salât al-ghâib*) for a Friday prayer for the absent or the dead. When translated, however, *La prière de l'absent* can be read in several different, connotative ways. A second reading can be proposed: the stated prayer is for the death of the very tradition that is being evoked. According to this reading the title could be restated as 'prayer for the absent or dead tradition'. In this case, the title is an example of a recurrent performance, in the form of "resuscitation" or reviving, of Arabo-Islamic culture within this Francophone novel. This narrative's "patrimonial" posture

with regard to Moroccan tradition is taken up in relation to nineteenth century France by Michel de Certeau in *La culture au pluriel*, a work to which I will return below. According to yet another interpretation, the word absent could refer to the subject of the prayer. In other words, the title could also be read as “the prayer of the absent one”. In this case, the title conjures a separation between a cultural practice (a defined field of traditional religious worship) and the praying subject. Either the author is absent or the object of the prayer is absent or dead. The additional meanings of title we have proposed, and which will be consistent with our reading of the novel, spring up only as a result of translation into French. These multiple interpretations of the title, when considered together, constitute a curious discursive practice with relation to the Arabic language and Muslim tradition that will come to bear on the reading of the novel that follows.

Perhaps it is the very form of the prayer, or writing, that establishes its object as dead. A spatial and historical separation is established between the milieu from which the discourse is created (the *lieu d'énonciation*) and the Moroccan places and traditions that are described. The history of the Moroccan struggle for Independence and Moroccan culture are represented through a didactic mode that denotes both the foreignness of the implied reader and a politics of the milieu from which the history is transmitted. The author writes “his own history” as a dead history, an “object” to be transmitted but that no longer activates a dynamic mode of production in the present. In this respect references to Arabo-Islamic traditions, literature and the Arabic language as well as Moroccan history are herein limited to a didactic function. Space becomes the authenticating terrain that allows for the transmission of this material. In other words, space, specifically the space of Fez, proves to be the essential heuristic factor in the production and transmission of a type of knowledge on Moroccan history and culture.

Ben Jelloun's narrative can be likened to a historical discourse described by Michel de Certeau in *L'écriture de l'histoire*, a discourse that establishes the object as absent/dead. This operation produces a distance erected between this object and the lieu d'énonciation of the discourse in question. The distance established between the narrative and Moroccan history (its object) by way of a transmissional mode, makes clear a certain number of problems within the discursive milieu. *La prière de l'absent* will be examined as part of a posture vis-à-vis “deadened” objects of Moroccan spaces and history. This relation of absence, signaled by the didactic mode taken up in the narrative in relation to the Arabo-Islamic tradition that it continually evokes, will determine the necessity for a mourning of the dead object. This object can be qualified in many other contexts, as it has been aptly by Michel de Certeau in his discussion of what he terms the invention of “folklore” and “exoticism” in nineteenth century France. In his *La Culture au pluriel* de Certeau writes:

Aussi n'est-il pas surprenant qu'ils la (littérature populaire) jugent 'en voie de

disparition', qu'ils s'attachent maintenant à préserver des ruines, ou qu'ils y voient le calme d'un en-deça de l'histoire, l'horizon d'une nature ou d'un paradis perdu. En quête d'une littérature ou d'une culture *populaire*, la curiosité scientifique ne sait plus qu'elle répète ses origines et qu'elle cherche ainsi à ne pas rencontrer *le peuple*. (De Certeau 1993:46)

Certeau's discussion of scientific valorization and subsequent objectification of popular culture and places extends, in the chapter entitled *La beauté du mort*, to include literary narratives which perform this resuscitation of the object that we observe in *La prière de l'absent*. In this way a death is posited in a simultaneous gesture of resurrection and preservation that while claiming to act in the name of "popular people" in fact is irreducibly *removed* from their contemporary experience of the space of Fez and its practices.

This relationship (absence of and from tradition) in Ben Jelloun's novel can be considered in light of what has been established as a discourse of "patrimony" or "cultural conservation," an ideological discourse developed particularly in relation to Fez (in the context of postcolonial Morocco) whose modes of discursive organization are shown to resemble that of folklore, a phenomenon also analyzed by Abdellah Laroui in *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine*. In *La prière de l'absent* Fez is the home space, both the author's and protagonist's home, and a mythic locus of religious knowledge and "spatial authenticity". Spatially defined authenticity is established on the basis of the Qu'ranic school the Quaraouiyine, and various architectural constructions in the medina (palaces, tombs, etc.) that are also currently objects of a debate concerning cultural preservation. Within this debate Fez has come to occupy a privileged position in the history of Moroccan culture, a position characterized by notions of a "true origin" of Moroccan identity. This status of Fez as "true origin" legitimates the historical and cultural information formulated in the novel. These questions of positionality become important when the reader considers a narrative that relies heavily on notions of origin, both spatial, cultural and literary. (Although I do not have time to describe the phenomenon in detail here, I have noted the use of classical Arabic literature and passages from the Holy Qu'ran that always seem radically displaced into a narrative that remains dislocated from their logic. These movements towards a literary and religious origin seem already translated, and then translated again in the text, taking on a stereotypical form.) Central to this inquiry therefore is how these elements are deployed in the narrative, or how representations and practices of the home city both conceal and reveal a defined and foreign positionality. How is Tahar Ben Jelloun situated within a postcolonial discourse that grapples with what exactly can be understood as "modernity" and "tradition"? This question needs to be addressed over and over again.

This novel expresses a certain sadness or mourning that we also see in the author's

articles. In *Le Monde* Ben Jelloun writes. "Fez, the old town.... Will it become a place of pilgrimage and nostalgia? Place of roots, of origins, of knowledge, it is becoming broken by time, lassitude and negligence."¹ The mourning of this "origin" broken by time will be reconstituted in a mode that at once establishes the object as inoperative, because reduced to a didactic function, and performs a recurrent resuscitation. The destruction effected by the passage of time is *repaired* by an essentialization of space and origin. To clarify this posture, it suffices to turn to Michael Gilson's discussion (in *Recognizing Islam*) of the "patrimonialist" position where the desire to preserve tradition and traditional architecture is directly defined by the interests of a class that emerged during the colonial period. Gilson comments on UNESCO's proposal to displace the current, lower class residents of the Fez medina in order to execute an operation of urban *réparation* or conservation. Gilson writes:

The proposed dispossession of the inhabitants of the old city of Fez reaches very deeply, therefore, into transformations of the social practice of Islam in the modern period. It touches on an enormous number of culturally and socially significant elements in Moroccan society and is not untypical of developments in the Middle East. *The irony in that the very bourgeoisie that moved out of the medina as it emerged under colonialism now, as a crystallized and formed class in the postcolonial period, reappropriates the medina in the name of a supposedly historically conscious desire to preserve an unchanging set of sacred Islamic values.* In doing so, of course, it changes once again the social pattern of the city and religion. *Furthermore, its conception of history is limited to a static and elitist view.* (Gilson 1982:212, my italics)

Gilson does not explicitly include Tahar Ben Jelloun in this group of bourgeois Fassis who left Fez and who now seek to "restore their home" by brushing aside the rural migrants that have been assuring the upkeep of Fez since the colonial period. However, Ben Jelloun's representation of Fez in this novel very strongly resonates with the position described by Gilson. The mode in which historical and cultural information is transmitted shows that a clear line is drawn between the subjects of this history and the implied, foreign reader. This mode also establishes a cleavage between the object described and the authorial voice insofar as the "practice" of the space in question is framed for an Other created within the dynamic of the discourse. References to Arabo-Islamic culture serve to authenticate the narrative to the foreign reader while translation into French renders them knowable and ready for consumption.

Part II: Returning to the Birthplace

Returning home to Fez and the insistence on Fez as origin are crucial aspects of the narrative's development. In *La prière de l'absent* several instances of returning are keynote: Sindibad (the protagonist and intermittent narrator) returns to Fez to begin this narrative, the

characters then return to the Moroccan south, and in the final episode of the novel, Sindibad again returns to his home in Fez. In the first episode Sindibad returns home to Fez. Sindibad is a manifestation of a disincarnate spirit waiting to regain a new body and a new life. Before the spirit goes on to his next life, he reviews the adventures of his former incarnation (the events of which will constitute the novel's diegesis), and for this purpose returns to his home city of Fez. "Le retour sur soi l'oppressait et lui rappelait toute la fragilité du monde. Il aurait voulu, un peu pour se rassurer- mais en avait-il le droit et la force-, faire un signe à la ville endormie, caresser d'un geste de la main une des collines de Fès, sa ville natale..." (13). Fez is immediately linked to biological birth, spiritual rebirth (the place from which the spirit will be reincarnated), as well as the "birth" or inception of the narrative. These birth images continue throughout the novel and take on new and curious meanings.

Fez is represented as a mythic, irreducibly original space, within which have occurred the historic events of Morocco. The repeated allusion to Moulay Idriss (founder of Fez in the Eleventh Century) and to the Quaraouiyine (Qu'ranic school founded in the Ninth Century) mark the author's insistence on representing Fez as a divinely legitimated city. This legitimacy or sanctification serves to authenticate the historical narrative of Moroccan independence. Fez as the birthplace of the Moroccan Nation is described here through the conflation of an anthropological practice (the 'usboo' rite on the seventh day after birth) and a particular vision of Moroccan history (as born in Fez). The following description transmits Moroccan customs, and produces an analogy to the birth of the Moroccan nation with the founding of Fez by Moulay Idriss. Note that the description remains explicitly *instructive*, i.e., this is what Muslims do seven days after their child is born: "Au septième jour de la naissance, le grand-père égorge le mouton, à l'aube, après la première prière. Il prononce la *Fatiha*, lève ses mains au ciel et prie Dieu pour que ce garçon soit homme de bien, droit et vertueux, discipliné et sage...l'enfant avec lequel finiront les guerres et la misère et qui apportera la paix aux fils de l'Islam et à la Communauté unie de la ville de Moulay Idriss, fondateur et père de Fès" (28).

There is a parallel established between the infant's birth, blessed by the 'usboo' rite, and the benediction of the city of Fez by Moulay Idriss, founder and *father* of Fez. Fez is conflated with the child, since both have received divine benediction and will be instrumental to Moroccan Independence. The strangeness of this conflation offers a first insight into an eternalizing, spiritualist vision of the city of Fez. "On voit la Qaraouiyine, éternelle dans le silence de ce matin sublime" (57). Fez is inscribed into a horizontal space of theology, divine blessing realized in the continued reference to the "eternal" Quaraouiyine, and thus becomes the legitimate birthplace for Moroccan nationalist identity.

Along similar lines, Sindibad's birth is associated, by contiguity, to the "birth" of the patrie, the independent nation. Both are located in Fez. Moroccan history is recounted as if "originating" in Fez. The transmission of historical information intensifies around the sanctuary

of Moulay Idriss, founding father of the city. “Bien avant ta naissance (the grandmother says to Sindibad), le 13 octobre 1937, les Fassis- riches et pauvres, commerçants et artisans, lettrés et illettrés- se réunirent au sanctuaire de Moulay Idriss. Les mots de ‘patrie’ et d’‘indépendance’ furent prononcés. Quelques jours plus tard le général Nugus occupa avec son armée la médina et encercla l’université de la Qaraouiyyine” (42). Historic events of the resistance struggle are described explicitly in relation to the space of the medina. The medina of Fez thus becomes an essential and authentic place that legitimizes the historical backdrop of the novel. “Le lendemain une section des goumiers dirigée par le petit chef tendit une embuscade aux manifestants, à l’intersection de plusieurs rues de la médina, sur le petit pont du Rsif, le marché le plus fréquenté de la ville...” (31). Detailed historical information is articulated within the description of specific, and culturally charged locations of the Fez medina, namely, the Qaraouiyyine and the sanctuary of Moulay Idriss. The Qaraouiyyine becomes a metonymy both for a threatened Fez, and the future Moroccan nation. The grandmother continues: “L’histoire de Fès est aussi celle de tout le pays” (42).

The birth of the Moroccan nation is located in Fez. The narrator states: “Fès fut le lieu d’où partit le mouvement nationaliste” (29). When Sindibad’s grandmother speaks, the narrative affirms her Fassi sentiment: “Ce flot de paroles, dites avec fermeté, venues de la nuit, non seulement le soulagea mais lui permit de mieux comprendre ce qui se passait en lui” (46). There is no ambivalence about the legitimacy of Fez as the origin of Moroccan identity. This “fact”, although threatened from within by abandon and arrogance, is affirmed by official historiographical information. “Comme disent les manuels d’histoire: Fès, creuset d’une civilisation et d’une culture! C’était vrai. Mais c’était aussi le lieu de la servitude de l’âme pour l’égoïsme et les lois de l’intérêt. Société arrogante, elle pensait faire une histoire, et n’hésitait pas à revendiquer, comme l’un de ses fils, le premier résistant et martyr, Allal Ben Abdallah, qui leva un poignard sur Arafat, le sultan fanouche installé par les Français” (84). This apparent criticism remains merely suggestive, it supplies nothing more, not informing the rest of the historical representation.

The transmission of historic information, the birth of the Moroccan nation, is accompanied by the transmission of linguistic information. The presence of the implied reader continues to be noticed along with his or her necessary alterity. The episode of the General’s entry into the mosque Moulay Idriss is recounted and includes another, linguistic piece of information: “‘Ya Latif! Ya Latif!’ C’était l’appel des musulmans à la bonté d’Allah, invoquant son secours” (42). “Ya Latif” defines the implied reader as foreign through the presence of the authenticating Arabic language and culture followed by a French definition. In this text, this form of bilingualism will proliferate as a form of cultural transmission for the non-Arabophone reader. The descriptions of Fez instruct the reader in Arabic vocabulary: “Ainsi, l’année du typhus, les quelques bourgeois et artisans nationalistes se mêlaient aux enterrements,

participaient dans les mosquées à la prière de l'absent et traversaient la ville sous le regard embarrassé et soupçonneux des 'lassourtis' (on désignait ainsi les policiers en civil, des Arabes qui collaboraient avec les services de renseignements généraux français)" (29). Description of the medina becomes the terrain for the transmission of linguistic, historic, anthropological, and political information. *Lassourtis* is an Arabic word followed by a French definition of its contextual usage. The reader learns that during the independence struggle there was a year of typhus. *La prière de l'absent* marks reference to Arabo-Islamic practices, the Friday prayer for the dead/absent, thus providing a definition of the title. The inclusion of "arab collaborators" informs the reader of the political activities of a portion of the Fassi population. The narrative *instructs* on every level, and its practice becomes its nature: the narrative practices and becomes a guide for the foreign reader. Many other expressions of this didactic mode can be found: "Durant ces enterrements détournés, certains rappelèrent le fameux slogan des manifestations contre le *dahir* berbère de 1930" (31). This sentence is footnoted, defining the use of the word *dahir*, printed in italics in the text. The footnote reads: "Le *dahir* berbère de 1930 est un décret émanant de l'administration française et prévoyant une juridiction différente pour les Marocains d'ethnie berbère. La lutte contre ce décret réunit tous les Marocains, arabes et berbères. De là on peut dater la naissance du mouvement nationaliste pour l'Indépendance du Maroc" (31). This information again underscores the heterogeneity of the subjects of these histories and practices (for whom such definitions are superfluous or who may not read French) and the implied reader, the latter presumed to be unfamiliar with Moroccan languages, practices or history.

Identity becomes important especially in reference to Fez and its inhabitants, the Fassis. Thus a conflation occurs between original identity, or the genealogy of the author and the Fassi mentality. Through the descriptions of the Fez medina is transmitted information about the *esprit* of the Fassi population. The space of the Fez medina legitimizes a historical narrative and serves to "explain" local culture. The course of history is explained via this description of Fassi temperament, which is in turn objectified in the walls of Fez. The closed doors of Fez serve as an architectural metaphor of the closed Fassi mentality. Inside the walls/body of Fez is the exclusive space of privilege. This exclusivity marks the character of its inhabitants. "Même pauvres, ils aspirent à une forme d'aristocratie propre aux citoyens. Ce sont des hommes de la cité, hommes de l'intérieur des remparts, couvés par les mères et les épouses, prudents, calculateurs, souvent égoïstes et généreux dans les limites du clan...Ils se marient entre eux et verrouillent leurs portes par peur ou mépris de l'étranger. Est considéré comme étranger, celui qui n'est pas de Fès" (24). The physical description of the medina provides an analogy for the local character. "Si la médina de Fès est faite de ruelles basses et étroites, faites de labyrinthes sombres, de pierres vieilles et lourdes, c'est parce que elle couve, telle d'une mère, des certitudes fortes et inébranlables. Ville sans marge! La marge est hors de l'enceinte, au-delà des murailles..." (85) The space of the medina continues to be an essential vehicle for the

transmission of information, anthropological in this case. The reader learns what the old Fassi population was like: proud, stubborn, closed, elitist. This is the way it used to be, the old, lost Fez whose death is here mourned.

The physical signs of decay are causally related to a lost “original” soul. Fez is not what it once was. “Oublier Fès, les ruines de l’âme” (40). “Oublier Fès. C’était cela l’impératif” (41). These sentiments are articulated through the transmission of information that remains highly digestible, accessible, and “packaged” for the foreign reader. The historical elements are far from being obscure, and satisfy expectations of self-determination, return to Islamic and local practices, expectations that become problematic in the present context. These expectations are indeed characteristic of the “patrimonialist” position alluded to above.

Part III: The South

The space of Fez soon widens as the narrator embarks on a trip to the Moroccan south. “Nous allons vers le Sud. C’est un long voyage” (57): the departure is signaled by yet another description of Fez. This time, the city is seen from above, a position that indicates a movement away from the urban center. The description resembles a tour guide:

En longeant le cimetière, dans la direction de Fès Jedid, la médina est à droite, comme ramassée dans la paume d’une main, les maisons petites et imbriquées les unes dans les autres. On voit la Qaraouiyyine, éternelle dans le silence de ce matin sublime, un peu plus à droite le mausolée de Moulay Idriss, tache verte des tuiles alignées. Des terrasses vides. Des petits minarets de quartier. Au fond, une colline rouge et un ciel d’un bleu insupportable. Un vol de cigognes traverse à cet instant le ciel. (57-58)

The description again mentions the two most celebrated monuments of Fez: the Qaraouiyyine and the tomb of Moulay Idriss. This narrative unambiguously traces a search for origins, a quest that relies on the establishment of an Other identified as the reader instructed by the didactic discourse.

The voyage south begins in a Fez cemetery where Sindibad and his friend Boby meet a woman, Yamna who includes them in a mission to bring a wordless child to another mythic city of origin. “Nous partons donc vers la source et l’origine, vers le commencement et l’arrêt du temps” (76). The four characters embark on a voyage to find the Qadiriya located in Smara. The Qadiriya is a brotherhood founded by the Saint Muhammad Mustafa Ma -al-Aynayn al-Qalqami after his return from Mecca. The narrative continues to function didactically, instructing the reader in Moroccan history and geography. At Smara, Sindibad hopes to find lost virtues, it is

described as the place of origin and the destination of the four travelers. “Le nom et la vie de Ma al-Aynayn le guideraient vers la lumière, celle de l’âme. (98). “La mémoire de Ma -al-Aynayn...sera la source et l’eau qui préservent tes racines en plein désert. Ma -al-Aynayn n’est-il pas l’eau des yeux et de la source?” (76). Into this travel narrative is woven another, historical narrative of the struggle against colonial army and the foundation of the city of Smara.

As the voyagers make their way toward the mythic city, they pass through Marrakesh. Entry into Marrakesh provides the opportunity to describe the meaning of the Islamic festival of ‘Achoura. The cartography of the itinerary becomes the didactic transmission of cultural information for a foreign implied reader. The festival is not practiced in the narrative, but rather explained, defined much as an Encyclopedia would define it. “La ville célébrait pour eux la ‘Achoura: le dixième jour du premier mois de l’Hégire, le petit-fils du prophète Mohammed, Hossayn, fils de Ali Ibn Abi Tâlib et de Fâtima bint Mohammed, est assassiné. Jour de deuil pour adultes. Aux enfants, on donne des jouets, des fruits et des bonbons pour les distraire, pour les éloigner du deuil et du souvenir du malheur” (141). Since this description is not integrated into other activities of the narrative, it stands out as a bald definition or an emptied form filled with a new, ideological content.

The reader is also instructed about religious figures of local communities. “Qui n’a pas entendu parler de Bouiya Omar? Saint des saints. Marabout de l’extrême sagesse sans la moindre indulgence” (153). In order to gain the blessing of the marabout, another Islamic rite is invoked, the sacrifice of the lamb. “Qu’avez-vous apporté pour le sacrifice, pour l’amour de Bouiya Omar? -Un agneau, dit Sindibad...” (156). This sacrifice always evokes Abraham, father of Ismael. This principle of cultural transmission to a foreign reader is so systematic and covers the most well known events and myths that one begins to interrogate the mechanisms of the narrative and unhinge the ideology of its construction. Movement and spatial descriptions of cities are always in this novel linked to the transmission of cultural and historic information. This type of narrative is ultimately uninteresting for the (Moroccan) reader who would be quite familiar with these myths and practices. The continued opposition between the implied reader and the subjects of this history/story reproduces dangerous ontological oppositions characteristic of former, colonial times.

The next stop in this travel narrative is the southern city of Agadir. Interestingly, no cultural or historic information is given in the description of this city. This absence of cultural information (whether linguistic, historic or anthropological) can be explained by the logic of this narrative that in turn provides a contrast to Khaïr-Eddine’s descriptions in *Agadir*. Khaïr-Eddine’s novel was about the city’s destruction and the imposition of modern methods that assured the collapse of a preexistent cultural system. In contrast to Khaïr-Eddine’s vision of Agadir, Ben Jelloun’s narrative denies the region’s culture prior to the earthquake of 1960. Ben Jelloun’s vague representation of Agadir condemns the city to a “soul-less” existence as if the

city never had a cultural identity. “Où nous mène le vent à présent? Nous ne sommes pas loin d’Agadir, ville sans âme, ombre épaisse d’une âme défunte, figure esquissée dans les plis de l’apparence et du temps...” (206).

The narrative has previously alluded to the importance of the Berbers in the resistance to colonial intrusion. An Arabic text with its translation into French has referred to the importance of Berber populations: “O mon Dieu le Bon! Nous implorons Ta Bonté Pour ce qui est arrivé à la fatalité. Et que rien ne vienne nous séparer De nos frères Berbères!” (31). But when the travelers arrive in Agadir, a primarily *Berber* region where Tachelhite is the mother tongue of many inhabitants, family histories and traditions suddenly become insignificant. The travelers arrive in a small village called “le village de l’attente” on the outskirts of Agadir. The narrative recounts: “C’était en effet sur cette terre sans grand attrait que des familles mutilées par le tremblement de terre d’Agadir s’étaient réfugiées. Elles attendaient, depuis cette nuit de février 1961 où la terre s’ouvrit pour emporter ses biens, le retour qui d’un père, qui d’un fils, qui d’une sérénité brisée par la colère de la pierre.” (197) (Note that the earthquake actually occurred in 1960). This text makes no mention of the history of Berber customs in the region. In Khair-Eddine’s novels, the cultural transmission of the peoples of this region is said to rely on images of and contact with the earth. In Ben Jelloun’s narrative, it is the inhabitants’ so-called disrespect for the earth that causes the earth’s “revenge”. One of the inhabitants in the village describes Agadir as an infanticidal mother, a personification paradoxically dehumanizing both the city itself and the people who experienced the event. “Agadir est une ville qui n’a plus de respiration. Elle est orpheline à jamais. Elle a un coeur en béton armé et des enfants au sourire figé. C’était une mère abusive. Elle a mangé ces enfants...Au village, la terre peut trembler...elle ne nous aura pas!” (209). According to this narrative, Agadir have no part in the history or origin of Moroccan identity. “N’entre pas à Agadir. Ce n’est même pas un cimetière” (212).

In what may be an attempt to resist the colonial opposition Berber-Arab within Morocco, the author seems to completely erase the Berber presence altogether. Within this “identity” opposition that is set up between the implied reader (them) and the subjects of the history (us), a certain reduction is performed of the definition of Moroccan identity. Namely, the “us” or the Moroccan’s are Arab, as opposed to the composite ethnic picture including Jews and Berbers we have seen in other novels by Khair-Eddine, Meddeb, Memmi and others. The novel performs an eclipse of Berber customs that is visible in the episode taking place in Agadir. This erasure of Berber presence is continued in Ridha Bourkhis’s critical study of Tahar Ben Jelloun in which he lists Agadir, a Berber region, in an inventory of “Villes, villages, régions, endroits arabes” mentioned in Ben Jelloun’s œuvre. Bourkhis again reveals this conflation of Arabo-Islamic and “Arab” at other parts of his study. The introductory sentence to his chapter, “La connotation culturelle” is noteworthy. “Cette langue qui n’est pas celle de Tahar Ben Jelloun

est bien entendu le français, et ce pays qui est par contre le sien n'est rien d'autre que le Maroc, un pays arabe" (Bourkhis 1995:127). This reading is consonant with what has been observed as the evacuation of Berber practices from the descriptions in *La prière de l'absent*, and should be noted as a problem of reduction or simplification that is implied by the quest for "original, Arab identity" in Morocco.

Part IV: Fez, the Real Origin

The narrative concludes with a return to Fez, reaffirmed as legitimate point of origin. The home is comfortable because transparent and comprehensible. "Il n'était plus tiraillé par le monde extérieur et avait le sentiment vif de rentrer chez lui, de marcher à reculons vers sa propre demeure, une maison de verre qu'il avait abandonnée. Il escaladait des marches et avançait dans des patios et vestibules" (225). Home is instantly, and it might be added miraculously, transformed into the perfect place for prayer, a religious place previously sought through the historical narrative of Ma al-Aynayn's village. "Il s'arrêtait auprès d'un citronnier au milieu de la cour pendant que la petite fontaine donnait de l'eau à sa grand-mère venue faire ses ablutions pour la prière" (225-226). Home waxes eternal, like the *Qarayaouine éternelle*, which remains unchanged in Sindibad's absence. Home denotes comfort, sensuality and familiarity. "Il avait presque oublié les coins et les recoins de la maison natale, de cette chambre à la terrasse où il élevait les pigeons et où encore enfant il jouait avec le corps féminin et ambigu de son cousin." (226). This sensuality, elsewhere noted as a main feature of Orientalist representation, dominates the description of the return to Fez. Suddenly, returning is clearly located in a warm, sensual, de-problematized Fez, reassuring and maternal. "Il se sentait plein de la chaleur du retour... Rien n'avait bougé. Les mêmes gestes à travers une même durée: la prière, le dîner silencieux, la veillée autour de la grande-mère, le roucoulement des pigeons et la bonne qui montait à la terrasse au milieu de la nuit pour retrouver son amant mystérieux" (226). The description insists on sensual pleasure and timelessness. The narrator returns to a submissive, sparkling Fez. Fez is again endowed with the characteristics of a central, essential Moroccan city. "Fès, la ville ancienne, la ville des villes..." (233).

Conclusion

The discursive operation of this novel has been described in relation to the mechanisms used by historiographers. Michel de Certeau argues that historiographers write within a milieu of the present whose stakes are concealed by their discourse. This milieu is described in the following way: "Such is the double function of the place. It makes possible certain researches...but makes others impossible; it excludes from discourse what is its basis at a given

moment; it plays the role of a censor with respect to current — social, economic, political—postulates of analysis” (Certeau 1992:68). The didactic mode of Ben Jelloun’s narrative articulates a quest for identity while concealing the political ground from which this quest is launched. In this form, the search for identity creates a past and a space that is necessarily immobilized (objectified, mortified) in order to be resuscitated by the narrative. The immobilization of past traditions and original spaces produces a “museum effect” characteristic of an elite’s folkloric view of its society. This operation has particularly concrete repercussions on local populations and their current practices of these places in question.

Following de Certeau’s critical analysis of historiography, this novel can be described in terms of a separation between the writer’s *milieu* (as exile, Fassi, Francophone) and country he is describing. Descriptions of Fez become an operation by which identity is sought within and in the language of a Francophone readership. The importance of this separation for this short essay consists of the effect of home identified through its reproduction for a foreign implied reader. Recognition is sought by way of a discourse of “patrimony” (seeking to conserve original practices of original places) that conceals a political basis. De Certeau explains: “Envisaging history as an operation would be equivalent to understanding it as the relation between a *place* (a recruitment, a milieu, a discipline), analytic *procedures* (a discipline), and the construction of a *text* (a literature)” (Certeau 1992:57). This problem provides a terrain of further investigation for those interested in interrogating literary representations of Moroccan history. All of Ben Jelloun’s novels cannot necessarily be assimilated into the argument advanced concerning the reiteration of home in *La prière de l’absent*. However, more work needs to be set in motion to problematize the way in which history is represented, especially according to writers who have a wide readership, as does Tahar Ben Jelloun.

Notes

¹ *Le Monde*, January 9-10, 1977, p.8. Cited in Gilseman, *Recognizing Islam*, p.210.

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