THE SEVEN SAINTS OF MARRAKESH TALES AND TRADITIONS

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"I went to the Seven Saints". In Morocco, this expression is synonymous with: I went to Marrakesh. Marrakesh is a city in the south of Morocco. In 1992 I carried out a small-scale research concerning the Seven Saints of the city. One might be already familiar with the Seven Saints which were described by de Castries in his well-known article that was published in Hespéris (1924). He writes among other things that this group of seven patron saints did not arise spontaneously from popular worship, since it was institutionalized by the Moroccan authorities in the seventeenth century A.D. as a reaction to the existence of another group of Seven Saints which were considered to form a threat to the royal supremacy in the region; those were the seven of Regraga. The Regraga form a Berber tribe which maintained a close relation with the Chiadma, another Berber tribe. Both tribes belong to the bigger family of the Masmouda-Berber. Their territory is an area north-west of Marrakesh. At that time the rebellious Chiadma had just overthrown the dynasty of the Saadian sultan and this victory strengthened their belief in their Seven Saints. The new sultan, Mulay Isma'il, tackled the problem in a rather different way. His idea was to institute a rival group of Seven Saints in Marrakesh. The saints who are now the seven patrons of the city had already past away for a longer or shorter time: ages stand between the lives of some of them. They were already venerated by the people as was the case with many other saints, but they were more or less chosen randomly to become the patron saints of

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THE ARABIST. BUDAPEST STUDIES IN ARABIC 9–10 (1994)
https://doi.org/10.58513/ARABIST.1994.9-10.12

Marrakesh. They were buried in a circle across the city and a kind of tour along the Seven Saints was introduced for the pilgrims to be performed. One has to start at Sidi Yusuf ben ᶜAli's shrine, and after that visits to Qaḍi ᶜIyaḍ, Sidi bel ᶜAbbas, Sidi ben Sliman ž-Žazuli, Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz, Mul le-Qṣur (that is the more common nickname of Sidi ᶜAbdallah l-Ġezwani) follow. The pilgrim concludes his tour by a visit to Imam s-Suhayli. The tour takes a left turn (meaning anticlockwise) and in this way it is an imitation of the *ṭawāf* (circumambulation of the Kaᶜba) in Mecca.

Reading the article of de Castries 68 years later I wondered what was to be noticed of the Seven Saints in Marrakesh of today. I was especially interested in what the believer himself considers to be important with regard to these Seven Saints. De Castries did not tell us much about this aspect because he was particularly interested in historical evidence concerning the seven patrons. I, on the other hand, went looking for oral tales and still current traditions around the Seven Saints. For example I wondered whether that tour around the seven is still being performed by pilgrims.

During my two months stay in Marrakesh I discovered that one does not need to delve deep to come across a lot of relevant material to be listed. An interesting but confusing detail for me was that the people of Marrakesh do not agree among themselves who exactly are the Seven Saints. Many do not know all their names, or they may include a saint who in fact does not belong to this group. Some others even claim that the Seven Saints mentioned above are not the 'real' seven. The real seven are according to their opinion the seven small children which were buried side by side in a house close to Sidi bel ᶜAbbas's place. The legend tells us that they were all born from the same belly and at the same time, too. According to the *muqaddama*[1], the female custodian of these graves, the children are of Idrissid royal background. The Idrissids founded the first Arabic dynasty which actually ruled Morocco. These

[1] Moroccan Arabic words are transcribed according to the local pronunciation.

small saints are still being visited frequently, often by the same people who also pay a visit to Sidi bel ᶜAbbas.

The same cannot be said of the seven small and dirty graves that I found in two dark compartments underneath the 'Street of the Seven Saints' (*Derb Sebᶜatu ṛ-Ṛžal*) within smelling distance of the *Dar d-Debbaġ* (the traditional tanneries) in Marrakesh. The people of that quarter (*l-Muqf*) know of their existence but few other people do, so they are hardly visited by pilgrims. Whoever might want to see them though, has to come after six in the evening, because the seven graves can only be reached through a house whose mistress is absent during daytime[2].

I return now to the first group of Seven Saints, those of de Castries. Owing to the limitation of space, I cannot present in this article everything I have learnt about the Seven Saints of today. Here I restrict myself to the special powers for curing specific diseases that three of the Seven Saints of Marrakesh possess.

First of all, I present a short poem that was sung for me by Lalla Fatma Yahya Tagurramt, an old woman of Berber origin. According to her, it is an old song:

sebᶜatu ṛ-ṛžal llah yhenni-kŭm
ila ḥna ḥeyyin bina nenẓuṛu-kŭm
ila ḥna meyyetin llah yhenni-kŭm!
"Seven Saints, may Allah grant you peace
In the case we stay alive, we want to visit you (again)
But in the case we die, good-bye, so long"!

Why are people visiting the Seven Saints? Or one of them? Or saints in general? I cannot sum up all the possible sacral and profane

[2] The two alternative groups of seven saints are also shortly mentioned in the literature on the subject: see de Castries (1924:288) Deverdun (1959:513) and Jemma (1971:11). However, these writers failed to observe that many believers still hold them in esteem and continue to visit them, too.

reasons for a visit or *zyaṛa*. Therefore I restrict myself, as I already told beforehand, to one reason: people are visiting a saint's place in search for healing of a specific disease or complaint. The saint is thereby seen as an intercessor or mediator who stands between the common mortal and God. In orthodox Islam only the prophet Muḥammad is considered to be a legitimate mediator and intercession by saints is strictly speaking entirely wrong. In practice, however, the visiting of saints is partly accepted, that is to say, prohibitions proved to have no effect whatsoever, and instead rules were formulated to prevent even more serious deviations. The believer for example is not allowed to address his prayers and requests to a saint. Also, some saints are recognized by the orthodoxy while others are not. Nevertheless, the common people are quite unconcerned with this kind of matters: they address both God and saints while persistent tales and traditions around saints serve as legitimation for their particular behaviour.

In Morocco one finds saints who cure any disease or complaint, while others are more specialized. However, many are both family doctor and specialist. Healing is achieved by the positive and blessing power (*baraka*) that saints possess according to the believers and it is this baraka that they are looking for while visiting a saint. So in case of sickness the believer might decide for a visit to a sanctuary. Which particular saint he will choose for that purpose is a very personal matter. He might go to the saint with whom he is most familiar or about whom he heard some appealing stories from others. In this way believers can go to saints on their own account, though it is also possible that they were directed through dreams, by a fortune-teller, a *fqih* (a traditional healer), *žnun* (spirits) or another saint. For saints are still playing an important role in Moroccan traditional healing. Water and oil from sanctuaries can also be used during healing rituals elsewhere and such a ritual might be concluded by a visit to one or more saints. Thus the worship of saints is not the only means through which the believers try to achieve recovery[3].

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[3] See for examples: Akhmisse 1985.

The Seven Saints

In principle, the Seven Saints of Marrakesh heal all possible diseases, but three of them are also specialists. One by one I will deal with them and their specializations. In the case of two of these three saints the specialization changed in the course of time. So the reputation of a saint is still subject to changes after his death and does not lie firm.

Sidi Yusuf ben ʿAli

The first specialist of the Seven Saints is Sidi Yusuf ben ʿAli. During his life he suffered from leprosy. He died in 1196-1197 of our era.

In today's Marrakesh kids who are especially difficult and naughty are brought to Sidi Yusuf's place. It concerns children who are crying a lot or still wet their beds and the like. In the middle of the sanctuary there is a tomb which is in fact empty, because the real grave of the saint can be found in a space underneath. One reaches this space by a small wooden stairs which starts behind and on the left side of the empty tomb. The space underneath the earth is damp and smelling musty. It is only lighted by a small bulb and some candles in the case that these were brought along. Children are left alone with Sidi Yusuf for a while and this seems to work out quite well. Similar dark spaces where children are left behind are often found throughout Morocco with saints who also cure children with difficulties. A fellow girl student, who comes from Northern Morocco, told me, that one day when she was young, her mother had taken her to the sanctuary of a *sidi*. Under false pretences she was lead in a dark room there. The door had slammed behind her and she was left alone there for a while. Her mother had decided to do so because she was tired of her daughter who at relatively advanced age was still wetting her bed. Her daughter, who was caught up in this way, was seized with alarm, but the result turned out to be quite satisfying to her mother!

But at Sidi Yusuf ben ʿAli's place this is not the only way to solve such problems. The custodian or *muqaddam*, an old man who performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, writes down the six *āyāt aš-šifā'* for whoever

wants them. These are the six Qur'ānic verses which all are connected with curing and healing[4] and in this case are brought together to form a *ktaba* that is written with *sumaq* or *smeq*, a kind of black ink that is especially used in Qur'ānic schools. The six verses can also be recited above rainwater and then drunk by the sick patient, in this case the child.

Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz

The second specialist I will deal with is Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz. He died in 1508 and people say that he was also a doctor. He treated mainly patients who suffered from syphilis. These people came to his sanctuary and took a bath in two basins on the inside of which Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz is said to have written magical formulas. The basins are no longer there but people assert that they can still be found underneath the tomb of Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz. Furthermore it is told there was a lamp hanging inside the sanctuary of this same Sidi that was constantly burning and of which the oil was used against the infection with syphilis (Legey 1926: 151-152). I myself did not see such a lamp and I did not hear people tell about syphilis patients either.

Nowadays people visit Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz especially in cases of having a cold or serious coughing for example. At Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz's place olive-oil is obtainable for that purpose. This oil should be rubbed on the chest of the patient. If it concerns children and if desired the *muqaddam* himself gives them a massage and this procedure is then repeated for three successive days. In advance the oil is warmed a bit above a charcoal burner that is found in the sanctuary. Nothing else is added to the olive-oil.

One can also go to Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz in the case of skin diseases or skin-affections. For that purpose next to olive-oil water is also available. During his lifetime, Sidi ᶜAbdlᶜaziz himself seemed to have rubbed his own spittle on the affected skins of his patients.

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[4] These verses can be found in the following *sūras* in the *Qur'ān*: 9.14 (14); 10.51 (58); 16.69 (71); 11.82 (84); 26.80 (80); 41. 44 (44).

Mul le-Qṣur

I will dwell at length on Mul le-Qṣur, the third specialist of the Seven Saints. I will deal with his specializations first and after that some other traditions in connection with his person will be treated.

Mul le-Qṣur died in 1528. I heard a story about his quality as a healer from my aunt *ḥažža* Zaynab. It was told to her by a *fqih* and she told me that may be it was not correct. Nevertheless I repeat it here:

"The first people told that Mul le-Qṣur went to the mosque to perform the *ṣalaṭ* (the ritual prayer). The place was crowded with people. They all performed the prayer, except for one man who was just sitting there while his hands were trembling and shaking (*ḥažža* Zaynab imitated his movements). Mul le-Qṣur asked the other people about this man and his condition and they told him that he was a cripple. Everybody left the mosque and the door was shut. The cripple stayed in the mosque however. Thereupon Mul le-Qṣur changed himself into a snake, went up and appeared at the window of the mosque. The cripple saw the snake and this gave him such a fright that he was able to walk again. He got up, opened the door of the mosque and walked outside. The man happened to be very rich and he gave all his possessions to Mul le-Qṣur: everything that is now his *zawya* where he is buried."

The story tells us about a cripple who is cured by Mul le-Qṣur, but the healing of the lame was and is, as far as I know, not his specialization.

It seems that in the past especially madmen or lunatics (*ḥmaq*) were treated in his sanctuary or *zawya* (Legey 1926:1523; Deverdun 1959: 427-428), but the *muqaddam*, a descendant of Mul le-Qṣur, told me that this kind of people go visiting another saint. This means that they stopped visiting Mul le-Qṣur in particular.

Mul le-Qṣur is now mainly specialized in eye diseases and skin-affections. For that matter a bowl filled with a mixture of olive-oil and water is placed ready inside a niche (that is actually the electricity-case!) in the hall of the sanctuary. If it is desired one can immediately use and apply the oil there.

A lawyer told me that he had had a bad eyesight before. He had gone for a visit to Mul le-Qṣur and had used the oil for his eyes. He had recovered since that time. He told me that the oil is touched by every one, so it must have been full with bacteria. Nevertheless it had turned out to be a good remedy. His story reminded me of something I had read somewhere before: things which seem to be dirty can become beneficial and purifying in the vicinity of a saint. This implies a kind of (symbolic) reversal of the daily reality (Gilsenan 1990:90-l). People apply the oil not only to their eyes, but also to their hands and forehead. They can use it to their likings.

The *muqaddam*, Mulay Ibrahim, who now lives in the *zawya*, told me that in principle everyone is welcome in Mul le-Qṣur's sanctuary: Jews and Christians are also allowed to visit him. He told me about another *naṣṛaniya* (a Christian/western woman) who benefited by a visit to this saint: she was cured from the *ḥbub* (blotches) on her skin while many other treatments that she had tried before had failed. She expressed her thanks to Mul le-Qṣur by bringing a ram (*ḥewli*) to his sanctuary. According to the *muqaddam* this had all been Allah's work: this conforms to the orthodox Islamic view.

In Marrakesh Mul le-Qṣur is also mentioned in connection with circumcision. In the second week after *ʿid l-mulud* (the birthday of the Prophet) the annual *mawsim* of Mul le-Qṣur takes place. It is a famous festival and on this occasion hundreds of young boys are circumcised free of charge in his *zawya*. It is said that thanks to the baraka of Mul le-Qṣur their wounds heal quicker than usual. Little girls can have their ears pierced the same day. On this occasion the *zawya* is crowded with people and also musicians and *ṭŭḷba* are present. The night before people from outside Marrakesh are allowed to sleep in the *zawya*. On the day itself a calf covered with a green cloth is lead in procession through the city of Marrakesh. It is a gift from a rich man who might have profited from a visit to Mul le-Qṣur, too. The calf is lead to the *zawya* of the saint where it will be slaughtered later that day. The pilgrims cook and eat there, too (Buitelaar 1991:111, 120; Chniber 1988:152-4; Fernea 1975: 283-297).

Mul le-Qṣur also distinguishes himself from other saints because of the *dlala* that takes place every Thursday. *Dlala* literally means 'public sale' or 'selling of goods by auction'. The *dlala* of dates at Mul le-Qṣur's place cannot be described in these terms however, as will be soon clear. The *dlala* starts early in the evening, after the ritual prayer of the *meġŭrb*. In July 1992 that was about a quarter to eight p.m.. It is the favourite time for a visit to Mul le-Qṣur's tomb, because musicians, many kinds of fortune-tellers (with cards, beads, pebbles and chains of shells) and an icecream vendor are all present around the *zawya*. The descendants of the saint, the *wlad l-wali*, are also present in a larger number than on ordinary days. On Thursday evening the sanctuary is crowded with mainly women of different ages. They sit on the floor in the inner court and in the sanctuary itself. The day I visited the *dlala* three male descendants of Mul le-Qṣur were present. On ordinary days I always saw just one of them, namely Mulay Ibrahim whom I mentioned above. Before the time of the *meġŭrb* these men were already sitting close to the tomb of their forefather inside the sanctuary. Dates were spread out on the carpet in front of them. When it was time for the *ṣalāt*, many women were sent outside to make place for those who actually wanted to perform the ritual prayer. These were also mainly women and the *wlad l-wali* themselves. People had told me beforehand that after this the descendants of the saint would recite a *ḥizb* (that is to say a one sixtieth part of the *Qur'ān*) over the dates, but this did not happen. According to some women who were present they had stopped doing this. Indeed, some women had already bought dates from the saint's descendants before the *ṣalāt*. After the prayer other women did the same: they gave a piece of cloth containing money, mostly ten dirhams, to the *muqaddam*, he took out the money and put back a handful of dates in return. No selling by auction took place as is the case with the *dlala* of bread at Sidi bel ᶜAbbas's place every Wednesday evening. Returning to the dates of Mul le-Qṣur: these are the *baruk* of this saint. Possible that is enough for many women, but those who really have a problem or a wish on their mind, return every time until they have spent two thousand riyals or about ten dollars for the *dlala*. If it is

desired they tell the *muqaddam* about their problem so that he knows about it, too. It is said, that once the *dlala* is fully completed, the stones of the dates are handed in to the *muqaddam* and in return he gives a bread to the pilgrim. That is why Mul le-Qṣur is called 'the man of the (last) bread' or *mul l-ḫubz* (*ṭ-ṭabeᶜ*). In this way the women told me about the event at hand. I did not see any stones or bread by the way. Not all the women were buying dates. Some took water along.

I elaborated somewhat longer on Mul le-Qṣur and the traditions that are still alive around his person. I did so, because with this saint a classification is possible with regard to the periodicity of the different visits to his sanctuary[5]. This is not so clearly the case with the other six of the Seven Saints of Marrakesh. First, the believer can visit Mul le-Qṣur individually whenever he wants to. Second, he can wait until Thursday evening when the *dlala* is taking place. You can call this a periodical ceremony. Finally, the pilgrim can go to the festival or *mawsim* of Mul le-Qṣur that takes place once a year. This feast is celebrated both individually and collectively. Remember for example the procession with the calf that is crossing the city. Both at the periodical ceremony, the *dlala*, and at the annual *mawsim* additional ritual elements are added to the common form of a visit to the saint. These elements might have a sacral character, but can also be essentially profane. There are a lot of possibilities to merely enjoy yourself on the fair that is surrounding the sanctuary for example.

I wrote about the specializations of three of the Seven Saints and about the specific things one finds in their sanctuaries in connection with these specializations. I would like to stress that the same might be reported in connection with other saints in another place. I already gave the example of the dark space for difficult children which is not only found at Sidi Yusuf ben ᶜAli's place but also elsewhere. Besides, so far as the basic elements of the pilgrim's visit to the Seven Saints are

[5] I borrowed this way of classifying the various ceremonies from Gaborieau (1983: 90-91).

concerned, they do not differ from a visit to other saints. I conclude by putting these basic elements of an ordinary visit in the following row:

The pilgrim enters a sanctuary while he or she is ritually clean. Often provisions are available to do some cleaning at the spot itself. The pilgrim takes off his shoes, steps inside the sanctuary with his right leg first and says: "*bismiḷḷah* (In the name of God)". Shoes can be left at the entrance and sometimes they can also be put in a wooden case with compartments that is especially meant for this purpose. The shoes are placed in such a way that both soles touch. Visitors who nevertheless want to take them inside hold and put them on the floor in the same way once they go and sit down.

If possible, many pilgrims walk around the tomb whereby they take a left turn. Some people kiss the tomb; for this purpose they sometimes pull the cloth or *keswa* that covers the tomb to their faces. Others first touch the tomb and then their own chest with their right hand, just as is the case with a common greeting among Moroccans. Some pilgrims kneel beside the grave.

In fact, people are free to say or do what they want in the vicinity of the saint's tomb. People told me over and over again no strict rules exist for that matter. Some of the *muqaddam*'s however, clearly dislike pilgrims who utter the notorious "*ʿṭi-ni* (give me this or that)". The tour of the Seven Saints is still performed but only by a few people. It is said that the pilgrim who performs it has to recite *sūrat al-Iḫlāṣ* twelve times at every grave, but not everybody is capable and obliged of doing so (Buitelaar 1991:60-61, n.13). In the case *ṭuḷba* are present in a sanctuary the believer can ask them to recite for him the *fātiḥa* or a *duʿā'* (a prayer that contains a request). The *ṭuḷba* receive some money for these kinds of services to the pilgrim. The humble prayers and requests to God or the saint can also be done by others than the (sick) people who are immediately concerned. This happens quite often: especially mothers deputize for them. The *ṣaḷāṭ* or ritual prayer can be performed next to the grave, too.

People are also just sitting along the sides next to the grave. They can drink water out of a fountain or a tap in the case they are available

in the sanctuary. Often cups are standing ready to be used. Also bottles are filled and taken home.

The *taymuma*, the big dark stones which are usually used for a ritual washing or cleaning in case people cannot use water, can be found in many sanctuaries where they are just laying around on the ground or on the tomb. People hold or rub these stones with their hands. They are especially used in case of sickness; people then rub the stones over the affected parts of their bodies.

In many sanctuaries pilgrims can buy candles that can be burned in the vicinity of the grave. Incense seems to be used, too, though I never saw people actually burn it. It is told that incense keeps the *žnun* (spirits) away.

In principle, pilgrims who visit a saint in his sanctuary do not need to pay for that. The same applies to the water and oil or something else that people take home eventually. However, most people do give something in return to the *muqaddam* or they put some money in the wooden box beside the tomb of the saint. They may give whatever they wish: this voluntary gift is called *ftuḥ*. Pilgrims may also give some money to the poor who may be present in the vicinity of the sanctuary. This is the so-called *ṣadaqa*. Friday is the day that is most suited for this latter kind of gifts. The money that is put in the just mentioned box is also partly meant for the poor, the rest of it is used for the maintenance of the sanctuary and as an income to the descendants of the saints in the case they exist.

A remarkable feature in almost every sanctuary is the *saržem l-wali*, that is the cast iron window-frame of the saints on which ribbons or pieces of cloth together with plastic padlocks (or *qfula*) are attached. The same padlocks and ribbons are also sometimes attached to the wooden box beside the saint's tomb. In this way the saint is literally bound to the obligation to help out the pilgrim in want. It is a form of *ʿar*, that is to say a formula through which the pilgrim imposes on the saint the duty to help him. Thereby he can even threaten the saint with complaints (Westermarck 1926, I:188-9, 553-558). It is said that if a saint in Marrakesh does not meet his obligations then the pilgrim can even go

to Qaḍi ʿIyaḍ (one of the Seven Saints) to have the law of him (Legey 1926:151). I heard more than once that the padlocks are especially used in the case the believer is looking for a house. In that case as in the case of other problems the pilgrim leaves, so to speak, his problems behind at the saint's place: he ties and locks them up, that is why in many cases believers use ribbons that come from their own clothes. They take home the key of the padlock and as soon as their problems are solved they come to pick up the padlock again. Thus, these padlocks and ribbons have a clear symbolic and magical meaning. Later they are often followed by bigger votive presents to the saints in case the wish of the pilgrim is fulfilled. In Sidi bel ʿAbbas's place for example a lot of clocks and candlesticks were brought in this way. The pilgrim often promised such a present to the saint beforehand on the condition of course that the latter helps him out.

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