BETWEEN ORAL TRADITION AND LITERACY. WOMEN'S USE OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES IN MOROCCO

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In 1988 I lived with a Moroccan family in the *medina* or old town of Marrakech in order to do research on women's participation in and interpretations of the Islamic ritual cycle and its symbolism. Once a month I offered the family and myself a break from one another by travelling to Rabat to visit some Dutch friends. Every time I came back the women in the family would hang on my lips to be told whom I had seen, how they had been and how they had treated me. On one such occasion I told them that a friend had treated me to a delicious meal of horse liver. They were shocked. According to them it was *ḥarām*, forbidden or taboo, to eat horse liver. Since this was new to me, I asked for more information. 'It is written so in the Koran' was the answer. I should have been able to predict this reply. Very often when asking women about the purpose and meaning of religious matters they state: 'It is written in the Koran'. To them, this simple explanation suffices. When theologically speaking it would have been more correct to refer to *fiqh* books (law books) or *šarīʿa*, Islamic law, these women, who lack formal religious education, usually refer to the Koran as their authoritative source. To them, this holy book is synonymous with Islam itself. Explaining their conduct to a Dutch anthropologist by referring to the Koran, these women place their activities within the framework of an Islamic way of life.

Such references are one of the several ways in which the Koran plays a role in the lives of these women. In this paper I will look into the meaning of the Koran in the daily lives of these women from the tanners' quarter of Marrakech. More particularly, I will address the questions of in what instances they refer to the holy book, on what occasions they 'read' it or have it read to them, and what role Koranic

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scholars play in the transmitting of the Holy Word to these mostly illiterate women.

The issue of the relation between the spoken word and the written word touches upon the anthropological discussion of the relation between oral traditions and literacy[1]. For a long period of time, oral cultures were predominantly described in terms of the absence of writing. The difference between oral and literate cultures was conceptualized as a gap between 'us' and 'them'. Vansina (1961) was the first scholar to narrow this gap by developing a method which allowed anthropologists and historians to analyse oral traditions in a similar fashion to written sources. Subsequently Goody narrowed the gap further by demonstrating that oral cultures had been influenced by literate cultures to a far greater extent than had been presumed thus far, so the view in which they were presented as two distinct entities became untenable (Goody 1968). Since then, scholars have come to see that literacy is not simply a matter of technology, but is closely intertwined with ideological practice. The meaning of literacy therefore varies within the different cultures in which it features. Inspired by recent anthropological interest in rhetoric, Fabian (1992) undermines the distinction between oral and literate cultures even further by pointing out that texts are never written without being influenced beforehand by the awareness that, in one way or another, the audience of readers 'listens' to the text. Fabian describes reading as the activity of retrieving the spoken word from behind the written word.

In the case of the significance of the Koran to Muslims, the relation between the written word and the spoken word can be aptly illustrated by looking at the Arabic word for Koran. The Arabic word *qur'ān* belongs to the root *qara'a*. Although in daily speech, this has come to mean 'to read', the literal meaning of it is 'to recite'. Strictly speaking then, the Koran is not read but recited. In different times and in different Muslim countries, the relation between the written text of the Koran and its recitation varies. In this paper, the culture-specific relation

[1] See amongst others Boyarin 1992; Goody 1987; Niezen 1991; Street 1984.

between the written word and the spoken word will be studied in the case of a group of mostly illiterate women among whom I lived, in the old tanners' quarter in Marrakech, for almost a year.

The Koran as guideline and symbol for an Islamic way of life

As the incident about the horse liver demonstrated, when women in the tanners' quarter consider something to be *ḥarām* or forbidden, they readily assume that such interdictions can be found in the Koran. Very often this is not based on exact or detailed knowledge of its contents. Of course, like any Moroccan, these women are able to recite some of the most important Koranic passages. But to them, the Koran is primarily important as a symbol of sound Islamic knowledge and as a guideline for 'the straight path', the proper Islamic way of life. In general, what these women perceive as correct religious conduct, they presume to be written in the Koran. Since, for example, male circumcision is inextricably bound up with Muslim identity, most women erroneously assume that it stems from a Koranic prescription. More locally coloured religious interpretations may also be cast in terms of Koranic prescriptions. Women explained the prohibition of fasting during menstruation, for instance, by maintaining that the Koran contains a story about a desert-trip by the prophet Muḥammad and his daughter Fāṭima during Ramaḍān. When Fāṭima began to menstruate, despite her protests she was compelled by her father to break the fast. Contrary to what these women believe, the Koran contains no such story. Nor have I been able to find it in al-Buḫārī's compilations of traditions, and suspect that they belong to the same kind of Moroccan folktales as analysed by Dwyer (1978).

That the significance of the Koran to these women is chiefly one as the most important symbol of sacred knowledge and proper conduct can also be illustrated by the fact that often when they relate their experiences to Islamic pieces of wisdom and guidelines, they refer to the Koran when properly speaking they are talking about texts from a *ḥadīṯ*, a tradition of the Prophet. Such references tend to be preceded

by the statement *maktūb* (*fī l-Qur'ān*), which in Moroccan-Arabic means 'It is written (in the Koran)'. For example, in an interview about the distribution of *'aql* or reason in men and women, a highschool graduate stated: '*Maktūb*, women remain wanting in their religion and in their reason'. When I asked her whether she learned this citation from the Koran or from the traditions of the Prophet, she shrugged her shoulders and replied: 'The Koran or the traditions, either one of them'. Apparently, it did not much matter to her whether the source of the statement on which she based her view was in fact the Koran or not.

That for convenience's sake she initially presumed the source to be the Koran may be explained by the fact that the revelation of the Koran is the most central theme of Islam. For Muslims, the Koran is the literal word of God as revealed to the prophet Muḥammad. By revealing the Koran, God addressed the Arabs directly and provided them with the final and perfected version of his message to humankind. The basic principles of what God demands of Muslims when they submit to him can be found in the Koran. Since the Koran sums up what it takes to be a good Muslim, it makes sense to refer to it when trying to be one. Furthermore, the Koran is a widespread, easily recognizable and tangible object containing a language that is shared - if not understood - by all Muslims. It is a summarizing symbol (see Ortner 1973), representing and summarizing in a relatively undifferentiated and emotionally convincing manner what Islam means to Muslims. In the cases described here above, the symbolic value of references to the Koran therefore primarily concerns the appeal to sacred knowledge and a correct Islamic way of life.

This emphasis on the symbolic meaning of the Koran should not be interpreted to mean that the text as such is of no importance to women. On the contrary, as the literal word of God, recitation of the Koran is of enormous value because of its *baraka*, God's blessings or Divine Power.

Recitation of the Koran

Moroccans have no strongly developed reading culture in the sense of individuals withdrawing themselves to read. Copies of the Koran can be found in every home, but few inhabitants of the tanners' quarter in Marrakech actually 'read' the book in private. Recitation of the Koran is primarily an activity carried out in teams on special occasions. Especially during Ramaḍān and for the celebration of the birth of the Prophet, groups of men gather to recite the Koran. To Muslims, Ramaḍān is the most blessed month of the year. In Morocco the fasting month is characterised by a high degree of intensified religiosity. Over the entrances of mosques banners are suspended with quotations from the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet concerning the virtues of the fast and the rewards that await those who keep it. Street vendors have substituted the second-hand books and magazines among their merchandise for copies of the Koran, while booksellers dress their windows with religious books and make sure they have an extra supply of Koran copies.

During Ramaḍān these merchants do good business, since it is the month *par excellence* for pious Muslims to recite the holy book. Most Moroccans conceive of the fast as both a physical and spiritual act of worship. They try to refrain from disputes and sinful thoughts and strive to concentrate on God. Reciting the Koran is one way to do so. The text of the Koran is subdivided into thirty parts, one of which is recited each night, so that by the end of Ramaḍān one has gone through the whole book.

According to my informants, it renders a lot of *aǧr*, or religious merit, to 'read' the Koran during Ramaḍān. Most of these women are illiterate, and even among the few that are literate - mostly teenage girls who attend highschool - I know none who 'reads' the Koran herself. This can be explained by the fact that being able to read and write is not the same as being able to recite God's word correctly. It is believed that only people with proper religious training can do so. Out of respect for the sacred word of God, other people are much more

hesitant to recite it[2]. Those who have enjoyed considerable religious training are usually men, so that it is almost exclusively men who gather in the mosque or the *dār al-Qur'ān*, 'the house of the Koran', to recite the Koran during the *laylat al-qadr*, the Night of Power, on the twenty-seventh of Ramaḍān, the night during which the Koran is believed to have descended from Paradise. The *laylat al-qadr* is the most blessed night of the year, of which it is said in the Koran that 'it is better than a thousand months' (Q. 97.3).

Although there are very few female groups that gather to recite the Koran, it would be wrong to conclude that women stay aloof from the Koran recitations during Ramaḍān. The daily television broadcasts open with Koran recitations, and most women I visited put on the television set to watch and listen to these recitations. Also, women are involved in the wake at the mosque during the *laylat al-qadr* by preparing huge platters of couscous which they deliver at the mosque. There it is eaten by the men who recite the Koran, and the homeless who come to the mosque to receive this *ṣadaqa* or food given away as alms. In this way women earn their share of *aǧr*, religious merit.

The second occasion on which groups meet to recite the Koran is for the *mulūd*, the celebration of the birth of the Prophet on the twelfth day of the month *rabīᶜ al-awwal*. It is believed that the Prophet was born at dawn, and women get up at that time to ululate to express their joy over his birth. As was the case during the *laylat al-qadr*, many men spend the night preceding the *mulūd* in prayer at the mosque, where women serve them platters of couscous. Recently there have been attempts to involve women more closely in the wake. For several years the local branch of the *Union des Femmes Marocaines* in Marrakech has organised special prayer sessions for women, while in 1988 there was a

[2] J. Spratt & D. Wagner (1986:99-112) describe the same attitude among Moroccans. It stands in stark contrast with the attitude of young Yemeni women: whenever their work allows it, during Ramadan the primary healthcare-workers in a clinic in Hodeidah withdraw in a corner to read the Koran (personal communication: Thera de Haas).

large photograph in the newspaper *L'Opinion* showing the daughter of King Hassan II attending a prayer meeting in Rabat.

What strikes one about the Koran recitations on the occasion of Ramaḍān and the celebration of the birth of the Prophet is that they are carried out in teams and take place in rooms designated especially for this purpose. This is related to the fact that in order to touch or recite the Koran, a person must be in a ritual state of purity. Furthermore, the intonation and vocalisation of words should be pronounced correctly, and in group recitations the members can support one another. In the light of the special care that attends Koran recitations, it comes as no surprise that when women have a personal need for religious support they turn to (semi) professional Koranic scholars.

The social significance of Koranic scholars

In daily speech, women distinguish between three kinds of Koran specialists: *ṭulba* (singular: *ṭālib*) or 'pupils', *fuqhā* (singular: *fqih*) or Koran teachers, and *'ulamā'* (singular: *'ālim*) or scribes. All three of these names refer to men who possess a considerable amount of Koranic knowledge acquired through formal religious training. The distinctions between the different types of scholars corresponds roughly to the three degrees of traditional Islamic education available in Morocco in the past.

The first stage of religious training was provided by local Koran schools where boys learned to memorize the Koran. It took six to eight years to memorize the whole text. In most families economic circumstances required boys to quit early to assist their parents. Those who completed memorization of the Koran could travel to one of the big towns for a second degree of education.

These first two stages of learning focused on memorization of texts only. Boys were not taught to understand or interpret the texts they were working on. Eickelman (1985:64) tells us for example that during the first years of his training, a boy would have problems reciting (a verse of) a *sūra* at random. Rather, he would have to start from the beginning of the *āya*, or part of which the pericope was a part, to

remember the words of a particular verse. Because of the sacredness of the holy word, recitation as such is highly valued. Understanding the text of their recitations was of secondary importance to the boys. Without further explanation the meaning of what they were learning was hard to grasp, since the classical Arabic of the Koran differs much from the Moroccan-Arabic dialect with which they are familiar. Exegesis only began to play an important role during the third stage of learning. For this highest degree of religious education young men attended formal centres of religious learning such as the Qarawiyin in Fes or the Yusufiya in Marrakech[3].

Since the so-called 'Operation Koran school' in 1968, as a result of which all Islamic education is regulated by law, Koran schools have become a kind of pre-school service preceding elementary school, while the training at the Qarawiyin and Yusufiya have been integrated into the theological faculties of national universities (Eickelman 1985:169-171). Official exegesis to develop and support the Islamic course regulated by law is now restricted to provincial councils of *'ulamā'* which were brought under state control in 1980 (see van Koningsveld 1990, esp. 56).

Although Islamic education has now been regulated by law and integrated into secular education, the names to denote different kinds of Koran specialists persist and remain variable. By what name a person will refer to a Koranic scholar depends on that person's educational level. A more highly educated person may refer to a man with only a few years of Koranic schooling as a *ṭālib* (pupil), while the same man might be referred to as a *fqih* by an illiterate person. The choice of reference also depends on the kind of service required from the specialist.

Of the three terms, that of *'ulamā'* is the most univocal. They are known to everyone as the official exegetes and scholars of the Koran and the *hadīṯ* or traditions of the Prophet. For most women, these men

[3] Spratt & Wagner 1986:92. For a vivid account of personal recollections of the different stages of Islamic education see Eickelman 1985.

are distant figures, whom they are unlikely to meet in daily life. Yet they pay much attention to the guidelines and explanations provided by the *'ulamā'* in television and radio broadcasts, such as in the popular TV-programme *Rukn al-muftī*. Viewers are invited to send letters to the programme in which they seek the advice of an *'alīm* concerning religious matters. Since it usually concerns issues that in one way or another they are familiar with either in their own lives or those of people close to them, women are highly motivated to watch the programme and thus learn a lot about the interpretations of Islamic prescriptions and recommendations as propounded by the Moroccan religious establishment. Religious programmes such as *rukn al-muftī* inevitably open and conclude with recitations from the Koran and the traditions, while the Koranic scholars often quote from these texts in their commentaries.

Unlike *'ulamā'*, *ṭulba* may live next door, so to speak. Almost every woman can mention the names of *ṭulba* in their family or neighbourhood. These Koran students and other respectable men who have memorized the Koran may have any occupation ranging from tailor to merchant. *Ṭulba* meet for Koran recitations in a *zāwiya*, that is the headquarters of a religious order, or in a mosque, or simply in someone's home. On special occasions people invite a group of *ṭulba* to their homes, usually in a situation where the host or hostess is about to cross important boundaries of social time and space. These can be moments of life crisis, such as recovery after a serious illness, before departure or after return from the pilgrimage to Mecca, or a circumcision ceremony. It can also be on the occasion of important dates of the religious calendar, such as the advent of Ramaḍān. In other cases people even invite *ṭulba* for no other reason than wishing to perform *ḥasanāt* or good deeds to collect *aǧr*, religious merit.

Inviting *ṭulba* is costly. Although they charge no fee and are eager to emphasize that they accept whatever recompense is offered to them, it is expected that this should at least consist of a lavish meal prepared of the meat of a ram that is especially slaughtered for the occasion. Moreover, not only the *ṭulba*, but also friends, relatives and neighbours

are invited to participate in the recitation session. Everyone must be treated to a liberal supply of food and soft drinks. This practice of conspicuous consumption is a way of reconfirming and redistributing the *baraka* or divine power that is mediated by the recitations of the *ṭulba*.

While the services of *ṭulba* are always performed by groups and are accompanied by a considerable degree of ostentation, the *fqih* operates mainly on his own. His contacts with clients are on the basis of privacy and escape the attention of outsiders. The term *fqih* is used for people who perform widely divergent activities. It may refer to a teacher in a Koran school for small children or to someone who works in the cemetery to say prayers on behalf of the deceased. But the term may also refer to a traditional healer or, more generally, a devout and wise man to whom one can turn for advice. Most *fuqhā* cannot live on the revenues of these services and have another occupation as well (Spratt & Wagner 1986:92).

Since the modernization of the Moroccan educational system, the significance of the *fqih* as a teacher has been largely diminished. For most women, the other qualities of the *fqih* have remained important. Although the *fuqhā* are consulted by both men and women, they play a particularly important role in the lives of women. Mainly women visit the cemetery on religious occasions or on Friday afternoon, when they cleanse the graves and pay the *fqih* to recite the Koran and say prayers for their deceased relatives. Women are likewise responsible for fertility and health matters and may therefore call on the healing qualities of the *fqih*. In fact, the *fuqhā* constitute practically the only category of male non-relatives with whom women may discuss personal or intimate matters. A *fqih* has even been described by a Moroccan man as 'a person who writes for women', that is making amulets for them[4].

This definition points to the most important service of *fuqhā*: writing amulets. When women consult the *fqih* concerning health matters, they usually expect him to write an amulet containing Koran verses.

[4] Léon Buskens, personal communication.

Three different kinds of amulets can be distinguished. The first serves as a kind of profylax. People wear these amulets to protect themselves against the evil eye, *ǧinn* or spirits, or against vermin. Prophylactic amulets are for sale in the bazaars and on weekly markets. At the marketplace the vendors often recommend their merchandise with a microphone in the one hand, and the Koran in the other. Besides amulets, the vendors also sell complete miniature copies of the Koran and lithographs of important verses. The hostess of my guest family received such a lithograph from a neighbour after having found a scorpion in our room. According to our neighbour, hanging the lithograph of what she presumed to be a verse from the Koran over the doorway would prevent any future scorpion from entering. When she realised, from the worried look on my face, that I was not totally convinced, she asserted that scorpions are afraid of the Koran. Had she not told me before how her mother had seen with her own eyes how some scorpions had been transformed into stones when a *ṭālib* recited some Koranic verses upon detecting them?

Reciting or carrying the Koran with them gives women a sense of security. Peets (1988:30) describes a woman who proudly stated that she was not afraid to leave the house after darkness because she felt protected by the fact that she could recite the Koran. For the same reason some of my informants carry miniature copies of (parts of) the Koran in their brassieres or, on special occasions, in a golden locket on a chain. Not all Koran verses are equally effective. Some contain more *baraka* or divine power than others. Especially *sūra* 2, The Cow, contains more *baraka* than any other part of the Koran. It is believed that reciting this *sūra* yields just as much *aǧr* or religious merit as reciting the complete Koran. Particularly the so-called Throne Verse (Q. 2.255) contains much *baraka*. Reciting this verse twice supposedly yields as much religious merit as reciting the whole Koran. For this reason, the Throne Verse is considered very suitable to be used in amulets.

Should one be struck with illness despite precautions, then a *fqih* can help out by writing a second kind of amulet, one with healing power. Not all illnesses can be treated in this manner. Many Moroccans

distinguish between 'illnesses for the doctor' and 'illnesses for the *fqih*' (cf. Crapanzano 1973:134). Some illnesses are believed to have natural causes, such as influenza or stomach trouble. In these cases the patient consults a doctor. Other illnesses are suspected to have been caused by black magic, spirits, or the evil eye. This can be the case when the patient has a sudden fever, suffers from persistent headaches, insomnia or impotence. In these circumstances the patient may benefit from a visit to the *fqih*, who confirms or establishes a diagnosis and gives recommendations for a cure. In most cases, he also writes an amulet. Amulets written on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays, the three most blessed days of the week, are believed to be most effective.

Amulets written for this purpose are of a personal nature and contain the name of the patient. As with prophylactic amulets, they often contain specific verses from the Koran that are believed to invoke much *baraka*. Besides writing religious texts on a piece of paper that the patient should carry on his or her person, the healing power of Koranic texts can also be applied in a different way. Women told me, for instance, that the *fqih* may instruct the patient to dissolve the handwritten paper in water and drink this. He may also write the text on a piece of white bread or on a boiled egg that the patient then eats. In the same vein, the *fqih* may write the religious text on the inside of a white soup bowl, which is then rinsed with water which the patient rubs on his or her body.

In this way, the holy scripture is literally applied as medicine[5]. What strikes one is that in every case the text is written on a white surface. In Islamic symbolism, white represents purity. Similar to the way in which the sacredness of the Koran is expressed by the fact that only people who are in a state of purity are allowed to touch or recite the

[5] Osman El-Tom (1985) describes similar practices among the Berti of Sudan. He argues that consumption of Koranic verses substitute carrying the text in the head by memorization of it. Memorization of the Koran is the most effective way to benefit from God's protective power, but as in Morocco, most people have not had the chance to do so. For a description of the use of Koranic texts in West-Africa, see Mommersteeg 1988.

Koran, when used in healing practices the sacredness of the text is expressed by writing on a white surface. This relationship between purity, sacredness and healing power is not unique. In the Moroccan world view, purity and purification are often related to health and healing. Some traditional medicines, for example, should be consumed in the *ḥammām*, or public bath, after a thorough session of perspiring and scrubbing. Similarly, the ritual fasting during Ramaḍān is perceived of as a process of purification, which renders one *ṣaḥīḥ*, healthy and strong (see Buitelaar 1993:107-111).

Most *fuqhā* who write amulets restrict their services to healing amulets. Some, however, connive with the spirits and write a third kind of amulet with which they can work magic. Women may resort to the *fqih* to write a *mḥebba*, for example, an amulet that will make a person love you better.

I have the impression that whatever kind of amulet women buy, they are generally not concerned with the actual text that the *fqih* has written down for them. As in the case of references to the guidelines for a correct Islamic way of life, they often assume that the text is Koranic. This, however, may not always be the case. Upon further inspection of the aforementioned lithograph used as scorpion-prevention, for instance, a colleague of mine confirmed my conjecture that it contained no Koranic verses, but instead consisted of a chain of religious formulae[6]. As for the text written on a piece of paper that is inserted into an amulet, the instructions are that lest it should lose its power, the amulet should not be opened again. Even if a curious disbeliever does open it, as I did after my return to Holland with an amulet that had been written for me for a persistent headache, the text proves to be extremely difficult to read. The handwriting looks as if written in great haste, and the letters lack diacritic marks. But then again, the women who ask the *fqih* for an amulet are no disbelievers. They do not wear amulets to be comforted by any message that the text may contain. Rather, they are

[6] Fred Leemhuis, personal communication.

primarily interested in the *baraka*, or divine power, that is transmitted to them through the text.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the role of the Koran in the daily lives of women in the tanners' quarter in Marrakech is first of all that of a powerful symbol of the Islamic way of life as they interpret it. They turn to the Koran as a frame of reference and a guideline for correct religious conduct. The meanings that they attach to the contents of the Koran may divert from the official *tafsīr* or Koranic explanations. Most women have little knowledge about the exact contents of the Koranic texts and in this respect have to rely on Koran specialists. In this process of translation, the written message is moulded to fit local needs and preoccupations: recitation or consumption of the text is employed in the combat against misfortune and illness, in the quest for love and children, and in measures to protect individuals as they undergo rites of passage.

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