

The History of Culture and Cultural History Between East and West⁽¹⁾

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Since the period of Al-Khilafa and up to the beginning of the 20th century, Arabic culture was an elitist one. That is to say, the only beneficent was the elite. Teaching and Education were a domain that was monopolized by some members of the social elite. Moreover, the field of knowledge was led by Al-Fakih (a religious scholar) who became a kind of institution by itself within an educational system whose goal was not the people in general.

Restricting knowledge to an elitist group was one of the causes that led to the spread of a type culture that is characterized by its orality. Although there were a few periods during which writing prevailed (the 14th Century of Hegira, corresponding to the 10th Century AD), there were also periods during which previous writings were endlessly reformulated and annotated. In addition, oral tradition was constantly repeated. Orality was in fact one of the main mechanisms of communication within a tribal social system.

1. We are greatly indebted to Professor Chakib Bnini for translating this article from Arabic.

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These tribal communities, however, were able to access the world of knowledge, in its democratic sense, only after they came into contact with the West which had, since the advent of the Renaissance, set up mechanisms that allowed mankind to enter the world of knowledge and learning. This contact was behind the collapse of the classical culture aforementioned and it opened the door wide for large groups of people to join the world of knowledge and learning, the thing which led, in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, to the democratization of this sector.

In spite of this opening and great change, the way this new knowledge was dealt with remained classical and did not reach large groups in society. Therefore, most of the knowledge that was disseminated, especially historical knowledge, was far from being of interest to people due to the methods followed in its teaching which alienated most of them. Such methods were unable to give people something to identify with. There was then a discrepancy between a discipline that was taught using sterile methods and the receiver who was the centre in the teaching of historical knowledge.

Our institutions and museums with their invaluable contents have not drawn much interest from those in authority. These contents have not been appreciated; even worse, they have been considered unimportant.

When we look at our museums, we are immediately struck by the fact that they suffer from many deficiencies in terms of their buildings and the things exhibited. As an example, one can mention the museums of Al-Bathaa in Fez which is situated in one of the alleys and which is rarely visited. Consequently, the small number of visitors does not have any impact on the museum and its surroundings.

We have tried to find out the number of visits made to the museum weekly. It emerged that during a period of a few weeks, the number of visitors did not exceed ten people, most of whom came there by accident. It has to be mentioned that the exhibitions in this museum consist of priceless objects of different sorts, among which are wooden pieces of one of the pulpits of Al-Karaouiyine mosque which goes back to the Zenati era.

In contrast, during our visits to the museums of London and Washington, we were amazed by what we saw: huge buildings which seemed to convey an important message; namely, that the patrimony of a nation is an important matter and is central to the symbolic preoccupation of societies. We were also surprised

by the hundreds of visitors who were queuing up waiting for the door to open and who did not care about the admission fee. More surprisingly, they willingly contributed some money as a gesture of support for the museum after having read an announcement urging them to support their museum so that it would be able to carry on with its cultural mission. This appeal for support is not interpreted by the visitors as a call for charity. It is rather understood as an appeal that is emanating from being fully aware of the role that the museum plays in revising history through the things which it exhibits.

The museums in these countries consist of many departments. Some of them contain rooms for historical training. History is not taught in the narrow academic sense; but it is rather taught by relating it to the system of the individual's everyday life. The history that is taught over there is referred to as Public History, and its themes have a relationship with what is exhibited in the museum. Thus, we have a discrepancy between two worlds: one which considers that the elitist culture is a nostalgic matter, restricted to a small group of people who have the knowledge and who monopolize it, and a world in which culture is considered to be an economic component that has its production mechanisms including specialized and highly trained teams. It is a sector that employs thousands of people and that has restored to history its important role.

The Ben M'sik Community Museum in Casablanca: an attempt to give consideration to the margin:

Within this context comes the important cultural project which is the fruit of academic collaboration between the Faculty of Letters Ben M'sik and Kennesaw State University and which aims at constructing a community museum in the marginalized neighborhood of Casablanca. Why the margin? What is its value and symbolic power in comparison with ancient cities such as Fez, Marrakech and other cities?

The margin of Casablanca is regarded as a museum that is open to history, collective memory and its surroundings. This unwritten history that is preserved in the minds of Moroccans, especially with regard to the period after the mid-fifties of the last century, can be considered as something similar to what our colleagues at Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA, do have and which we referred to as Public History.

The setting up of a museum for the collective memory of the inhabitants of Casablanca may not mean anything for some; it may even be regarded as a waste

of time by those who believe in what is written. However, this impression soon evaporates when this enterprise is examined more closely.

The museum is a memory store regardless of the value of its contents. It is a living memory because it contains testimonies of people who were instrumental in the making of its historical events. Therefore, the project which we are putting forward is a pioneer one even in its embryonic stage.

The first phase of the project was the organization of an exhibition of photographs in America and Casablanca. The exhibition included photographs treating themes which were suggested by the supervising scientific body of the project in collaboration with the colleagues from Kennesaw State University. The themes were aimed at introducing sites, people, events and the most prominent cultural aspects in the margin of Casablanca.

The second phase consisted of audio recordings for people holding this living collective memory in the margin of Casablanca.

The last phase, which constitutes an extremely important event, was the setting up of a forum for dialogue between the different actors participating in this event. This phase in fact is the first thing which any researcher has to do in order to present a particular culture. It was through this dialogue with the collective memory that the idea of establishing a museum as a space for culture, history and memory started to see the light.

We also aim in embarking on this cultural enterprise to write a book which records the living memory of the margin of Casablanca, a city that is at the forefront both economically and culturally. The book will also pay tribute to all those who have contributed to its urban expansion. It will also present this important cultural enterprise that encourages the simple layman to actively participate in enriching its cultural and historical patrimony.