

Silvia Bruni, *Confraternite, santi e spiriti. Indagini in Marocco - Parte I*, Udine, Nota, pp. 127, 2020, ISBN 9788861632110.  
 // Silvia Bruni, "O tu che viaggi e li ritorni". *Pratiche rituali e tradizioni musicali femminili a Meknes. Indagini in Marocco - Parte II*, Udine, Nota, pp. 191, 2020, ISBN 9788861632127.

Published after a long ethnographic fieldwork in Morocco – particularly in Meknes – which lasted more than a year, Silvia Bruni's two monographs are pleasant to read, clear in the use of language and meticulous in the edition and treatment of the sources and in the account of all collaborations. From their reading it is clear the profound knowledge on the subject that the author developed during her participation in the research project Marie Curie DRUM – Disguise Ritual Music (coordinated by Prof. Nico Staiti, University of Bologna) and that, later, delved into the doctoral thesis (University of Padua, 2018) from which this work is derived.

The first book, *Confraternite, santi e spiriti* (Brotherhoods, saints and spirits), leads the reader into the intricate world of Moroccan mysticism, taking into account both its historical depth and its contemporary dimension. It is a complex and contradictory universe that stands, in part, outside of orthodox Islam without explicitly contradicting it. Bruni develops her description and analysis with order and precision, in a multi-voiced dialogue with sources and collaborators, and through her in-depth research experience in the field.

The first chapter offers an approach to the brotherhoods between syncretism, social classes and ethnic and gender identities, revealing the changing structures around which these are organized, the roles of the main actors and the genealogies that legitimize their power and guarantee, at the same time, the transmission of divine energy (*baraka*). After a brief but complete presentation of the main brotherhoods operating in contemporary Morocco (Jilālā, Gnawa, Ḥamadsha, 'Isāwa, Tuhāma, Ahl-Tuwāt), the author critically discusses the different theoretical approaches that have guided the anthropological gaze.

The second chapter develops around the system of beliefs and cults that sees saints and spirits (*jnūn*) as protagonists of the complex dynamics of *baraka* circulation. As Bruni points out, *baraka* is a term whose semantic field is difficult to circumscribe: blessing, protection, luck, well-being or fullness are just some of the meanings it evokes. It is found in some beings, things, words or in nature itself when this symbolizes the spiritual itinerary of the saint who transmits it. To receive it and obtain its benefits, devotees participate in annual pilgrimages celebrating local saints (*mawāsim*) or visit shrines (*ziyārāt*) on dates not necessarily predefined. In this way, a relationship is created between saints and devotees whose purpose is not only to obtain a benefit, but also to cultivate a balance between the spiritual and the earthly world.

This balance is fundamental on a planet inhabited by spirits (*jnūn*), a social world complementary to the human and equally complex. Bruni clearly presents the pantheons of male and female spirits and the various intersections that exist between them and humans, articulating fluid and heterogeneous ontologies and epistemologies that do not

lend themselves to static classifications at all. The action of *jnūn* (or *mlūk*) in human affairs can have capricious effects, both positive and negative, and manifests itself mainly in vulnerable individuals who go through a liminal period associated with a change in their existential condition that makes them particularly sensitive to the presence, attack or possession of spirits.

In the context of the ritual system that has developed around these beliefs, the rite of possession (*lila*) takes on crucial importance. The management of the rite, characterized by a multisensoriality and multimodality in which poetry and music play a particularly important role, can be entrusted to male confraternities or, especially in Meknes, to para-confraternal women's groups (*m'allmāt*). Bruni describes the three phases into which the rite is divided and, in particular, the last one, that of possession, characterized by the execution of a set of pieces that marks the order of invocation of the masculine and feminine spirits. It does so by following the practice of the Gnawa of Meknes, often taken as a model by other brotherhoods of the city, but without renouncing to map the many variants that are observed both in Meknes and in the rest of the country. In fact, the structure of the rite can itself be understood as belonging to a series of strategies aimed at describing and reorganizing the world according to logics that belong to officiants and adepts.

The second book, "O tu che viaggi e li ritorni". Pratiche rituali e tradizioni musicali femminili a Meknes ("O you who travel and there return". Female ritual practices and musical traditions in Meknes), extensively deals with the study of *m'allmāt* groups and with the cults dedicated to Lalla Malika, queen of the female spirits of Meknes and particularly venerated by women and effeminate. Bruni uses this last term to describe public behaviors that are evident and that are evaluated in relation to hetero-patriarchal gender constructions assumed as 'normal' in the reference society. This allows to avoid possible associations with more or less private issues such as people's sexual orientation, an especially delicate aspect in a country where homosexuality is criminally prosecuted.

In the introduction and in the first part of the volume, with a clear theoretical and methodological imprint, Bruni discusses her approach to field research in a reflexive style by problematizing her relationship with interlocutors and with ethnographic methodologies. In particular, the first chapter deals critically with the usually assumed marginalization of women in Morocco, with special attention to spaces dedicated to the worship of saints. In particular, the first chapter critically deals with the generally accepted view of Moroccan women as marginal, with special attention to spaces dedicated to the worship of saints. Despite the interpretations that emphasize female subordination and evaluate the practice of possession in competitive terms as a reaction to marginalization and gender imbalances, the author prefers to consider them as spaces of agency and expression in which women and effeminate are recognized on a par with men. In this context, Bruni deeply develops the role of possession in the reconfiguration of personal identities, interpersonal relationships and gender roles not only at the time of the ritual to Lalla Malika (*taifūr*), but also in the daily life of the possessed.

Thus, after an efficacious survey of the female musical groups found in Morocco and Meknes (*maddahāt*, *ḥaddārāt*, *fqīrāt*, *huwāriyāt*, *shikhāt*, *jīlāliyāt*, *‘isāwiyyāt*, and *gnawiyāt*), generally belonging to the private sphere and aimed at an almost exclusively female audience, the second part of the volume deals extensively with the ethnographic study of the *m’allmāt*. These are characterized by a greater degree of formalization and relevance than other female groups and by the performance of a series of ritual practices that allow them to capture the *baraka* and spread it without the need to resort to male mediation, which is mandatory elsewhere. However, these rites are configured as even more marginal or liminal spaces than those of the male confraternities: the *m’allmāt* move not only in the syncretism between Muslim mysticism and the cult of saints and spirits, but also on the threshold of the religious and the magical, in a fluid and effervescent space. A space, moreover, that appears delocalized and not delimited by monumental constructions: a stream, a cave or a tree can be places of worship conducive to approaching female spirits, while song is responsible for articulating, in a fluid and variable way, their stories and symbolisms.

From these bases develops the fascinating description and study of the *m’allmāt* groups, of the stories of the effeminate musicians (in Meknes called “sons of Malika”), of their poetic and musical repertoires (*maṣmūdi* and *sūsīya*) and of the rite dedicated to Lalla Malika (*taifūr*). In particular, it is worth highlighting the richness of the third chapter, in which Bruni deepens her relationship with Hamid and Iman, privileged interlocutors and collaborators during all phases of the research. An investigation that addresses the relationship between the relative social marginality and the cultural centrality of these groups, which have managed to conquer a space of autonomy and legitimacy in the relationship with the sacred. The intertwining of ritual and musical traditions, between male and female practices, and the relationship between gender and possession are theatrically exhibited in the ritual space, but they also inform an everyday life that the author describes with special attention.

Bruni’s book is a must-read for those studying the intersections between music, ritual, possession, and gender. A mature and solid work that adequately addresses the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of research and that presents multiple development perspectives, both ethnographic and theoretical. At the beginning of the second book, the author reflected on her liminal condition in the field. A condition that placed her in a relative marginality, conducive to describing the equally relative marginality of the practices studied: “an observer that is almost African, almost European, almost possessed and almost researcher”, she wrote. After reading her excellent first work, it can be said without delay that at least a quarter of that liminality has definitively vanished.

MATÍAS ISOLABELLA