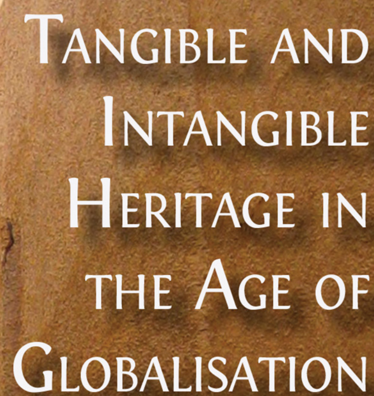

Tangible and Intangible Heritage in the Age of Globalisation

Edited by
Lilia Makhloufi

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9. Tradition Versus Modernity in Heritage Preservation Discourse in Postcolonial Morocco: Jemaa el-Fna Plaza, Marrakesh

Assia Lamzah

Introduction

Postcolonial theory is a valuable tool in architecture and heritage management discourse to understand and challenge the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in the French protectorate. This relationship and its impacts still shape postcolonial heritage management in Morocco. This chapter shows how Orientalism and colonialism explain the ways in which dominant perceptions of the world are organised according to hierarchical false dualities, such as tradition/modernity, West/non-West and centre/periphery. It analyses colonialism and the representation of the self and the other in the context of Orientalism, as defined by Said,[1] Bhabha,[2] Aijaz,[3] Spivak,[4]

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

2 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

3 Ahmad Aijaz, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992).

4 Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Interview with Gayatri C. Spivak' in *A Review of International English Literature*, by Kock de Leon (New Nation Writers Conference: South Africa, 1992), 23:3, 29–47. See also Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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and Young.[5] In addition to analysing how the tradition/modernity duality has been constructed and normalised, this chapter questions it and the ideological assumptions that underpin its construction. In relation to postcolonial heritage management discourse in Morocco, this duality is a useful theoretical tool to deconstruct the Orientalist mechanisms through which Moroccan medinas have been constructed and reconstructed and the way these mechanisms still may be working to shape the postcolonial context.

This chapter is organised into three main parts. The first focuses on the relationship between space, Orientalism and colonialism. The second analyses the false dichotomy between modernity and tradition as a result of the Orientalist hegemonic discourse. The third part is a case study of the Jemaa el-Fna Plaza in terms of these concepts and their false dichotomy and how they contribute to constructing and reconstructing the urban identity and social practice of the plaza. The analysis of issues of Orientalism, modernity, tradition and postcolonialism is not an anthropological interpretation of these concepts or phenomena; rather, it is an attempt to establish their utility in relation to the specific historical, political and social contexts of the Marrakesh medina in general and Jemaa el-Fna Plaza in particular. Since Orientalism and the debate about modernity and traditionalism still apply to the context of architectural and urban heritage in Morocco, I analyse them not to reproduce their initial meanings but to verify them and hopefully develop them.

1. Orientalism, colonialism and space

Orientalism, as defined by Said[6] and later criticised by other scholars,[7] is still relevant in the postcolonial understanding of colonial cities and societies. It helps deconstruct the mechanism through which dominant societies have constructed their 'other'—thereby creating an image of themselves.[8;9]

5 J. C. Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (New York and London: Blackwell, 2001).
6 Said, 1978.
7 Aijaz, 1992; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1999; and Young, 2001.
8 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).
9 Said, 1978.

Said explores the impact of Orientalism on the 'Oriental' and argues that Orientalist discourse is so powerful that it creates a double consciousness in the 'Oriental' mind. Said cites the work of Gramsci, who developed the concept of hegemony at the end of the nineteenth century based on the idea that people in the working class identified their good with the good of the bourgeoisie and contributed to maintaining the existing social order instead of revolting. He developed a theory that emphasised the importance and role of the superstructure in maintaining or fracturing the relations to the base. Said applied Gramsci's polemic against hegemonic culture to colonialism and Orientalism. In these contexts, the concept of hegemony is used to illustrate how the 'colonised' or the 'oppressed' come to see themselves and their interests through their colonisers' and oppressors' eyes, helping to maintain the social order and even to foster the hegemonic culture instead of a revolution that could help the colonised avoid the vicious circle of oppression and self-degradation. In this context, 'Orientals' become unable to see themselves outside of the frame constructed by the 'West', or the coloniser.

Said's work was revolutionary for its understanding of the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised, but it is not unproblematic. Many postcolonial thinkers have criticised Said's approach for its oversimplification of the relationship between 'East' and 'West' as one of passive versus active. They also criticised it for its unidimensional conception of colonialism and static model of colonial power relations. They agree that the colonial discourse, as defined by Said, does not leave space for agency, resistance or negotiation on the part of the colonised and for a change in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

In the mid-nineteenth century, with the rise of capitalism, European powers competed to expand their economic dominance to newly colonised regions. They sought out new territories that could provide materials for industry and constitute new markets for goods and services. Colonialism allowed the conquest and domination of those new territories in a literal sense, as well as allowing Europeans, differently and at different levels, to show and exercise their power and 'superiority' over the 'other'. Colonialism had tremendous economic, social and cultural impacts on both the coloniser and the colonised. As

a result of this European colonial expansion, the 'West' was constructed as the centre of the discourse of civilisation and 'modernity', while in contrast, the 'other'—the dark side—represented those peoples locked in the past, repressed and undeveloped. As King[10] explains, under the colonial paradigm, the world was divided into two kinds of peoples and two types of societies—'powerful, administratively advanced, racially Caucasoid, nominally Christian, mainly European, dominant nations, and powerless, organizationally backward, "traditionally" rooted, dominated societies'.[11] However, was the separation that sharp? Was this duality true? Or was this duality itself a creation of Eurocentrism and Orientalism?

The work of Orientalism has been extended to architecture and urban planning to see how Orientalists used space and the built environment to stress false dichotomies between modern/traditional, East/West and coloniser/colonised, thereby justifying their colonial actions as a civilising mission. Indeed, such scholars as Marcais, Le Tourneau and Massignon[12] have adopted an Orientalist approach to North African architectural and urban space, especially medinas. In their effort to understand the structure, functions and organisation of their urban territory, they have constructed the so-called 'Islamic city' as a theoretical model. They based this model on the presence of a central mosque, a souq that developed between the centre and the city gates, a division of the neighbourhoods according to an ethnic basis and the absence of any municipal organisation. They argued for the Islamic city's lack of regularity, constructing it as a non-city, a non-urbanism, in opposition to European cities.

Two main Orientalist approaches are identified in the study of the Islamic city. The first one, by British and German scholars, explained the structure of the city according to social and religious factors. The second, proposed by French scholars, aimed at a detailed understanding of the

10 Anthony D. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

11 Anthony D. King, 'Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism: Manufacturing Heritage, Consuming Tradition', in *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism*, ed. by Nizar al-Sayyad (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 5.

12 Georges Marçais, 'L'urbanisme Musulman' in *5ème congrès de la Fédération des Sociétés Savantes de l'Afrique du Nord* (Tunis, 6–8 April 1939). See also Georges Marcais, 'La conception des villes en Islam', in *Revue d'Alger*, 2 (1945), 517–33.

city's structure on the physical and morphological levels in order to control it. Both approaches constructed the Islamic city as a theoretical model rather than an actual urban form that resulted from a historical, political and social context. They also generalised this model to apply to the rest of the Islamic world. Such an Orientalist approach has been applied by French architects and planners to Moroccan medinas. Indeed, the Marrakesh medina is one of the most significant examples to study how colonialism in Morocco used architecture and planning to impose its ideology.[13]

Contemporary urban studies of cities in the Islamic world have demonstrated the limitations and biases of this Orientalist approach. Abu-Lughod,[14] Celik[15] and Wright[16] are among the scholars who have related part of their research to a critique of the Orientalist approach to North Africa. On the one hand, they demonstrated the impossibility of constructing one unified model of the Islamic city. On the other, they contributed to shifting the focus from constructing a theoretical unified model that would be applied to the whole Islamic world, to a different approach that looked at specific regions. More importantly, they revealed the importance of the link between the physical layout and morphology of the city and its specific geographical and socio-political contexts.

In the Marrakesh medina, to explore the structural complexities and the social meanings of the city as an urban organism, the work of Orientalism—re-examined in relation to the new challenges posed by contemporary urban and postcolonial studies—reveals how ambivalent the colonial discourse was and how diverse the city is in relation to multiple group interests and social realities.[17] The case of Jemaa el-Fna Plaza is illustrative of this, as is discussed below.

13 Assia Lamzah, 'Urban Design and Architecture in the Service of Colonialism in Morocco', *International Journal of Global Environmental Issues*, 13:2–4 (2014), 326–38.

14 Janet Abu-Lughod, 'What is Islamic about a City?' in *Urbanism in Islam*, Proceedings of the International Conference on Urbanism in Islam (ICUIT) I (1987), Oct. 22–28, Tokyo, 193–218.

15 Zeynep Celik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Occupation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1992).

16 Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanis*m (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

17 Assia Lamzah, *Colonialism, Architecture and Cultural Heritage: Marrakesh, Morocco* (Berlin: PAF Edition, 2018).

The built environment is more than a mere representation or reflection of social order, or an environment in which socialisation takes place. Rather, physical and spatial urban forms constitute and represent much of social and cultural existence; society is to a large extent constituted through the very buildings and spaces it creates. Therefore, the analysis of the built environment can explain how colonialism, by shaping cities, consciously transformed their social structure. The same relationship between the representation of a supposedly pre-existing entity and its construction operates in contemporary societies and environments in previously colonised cities.

Under colonialism, political and economic forces shaped cities and changed the cultural, racial and ethnic composition of local populations. Due to colonialism, the physical landscape was drastically altered and radically changed. While these changes employed the most current structural technologies, building types and planning ideals, they ignored local needs, and more importantly, they introduced a new aesthetic and visual order.[18] Socially, this had—and still has—consequences for local people's self-definition, identity and space. Moreover, the central social fact of the colonial process was segregation: Segregated cities created segregated societies and vice versa.

2. Tradition versus modernity: A false dichotomy

The constructed opposition between tradition and modernity is relevant to understanding the Moroccan context and the impact of colonialism on it. This dichotomy is too blunt, and the evolutionism underlying it is naïvely optimistic. Thus, it is highly contested. Numerous scholars have shown that social systems are not as simple and homogeneous as these false dichotomies suggest. Traditional values are still persistent in spite of social, economic and political changes.

During the colonial period, zoning was adopted when planning Moroccan cities, in order to isolate the locals, in their walled, precolonial medinas, from the Europeans living in the *ville nouvelle* (new city). This physical separation created a segregation that has changed the social meaning of the medina space and the relationship people had with it.[19]

18 al-Sayyad, 1991.
19 Lamzah, 2014.

The binary opposition between 'tradition' and 'modernity' is one of the main direct impacts on spatial production and perception in Moroccan medinas, and this still prevails in the urban and architectural discourses of contemporary Moroccan cities.

Modernity and tradition should not be approached as a binary opposition but rather as a 'vibrant couplet'[20] in which each defines the other and continuously shapes it. Historians and space theorists have assumed that modernity has transformed how people relate to their built environments and dwellings, and that it has broken the traditional relationship people had with their everyday cultural and physical environments. This traditional relationship was supposed to be natural. Giddens[21] argues that in pre-modern contexts, people lived under a closed system of religious beliefs that created space inscribed within its sacred authority, and therefore, people never approached the space rationally. Modernity, he argues, freed people from this system of beliefs and caused them to approach their space rationally. Under these conditions, tradition was redefined in a modern way, which made it lose its 'authenticity'. Thus, he concludes that tradition no longer exists.

The problem here is that Giddens presents modernity and tradition in a binary opposition, and for him, nothing can be conceived outside of modernist thinking. This can be compared with Hobsbawm and Ranger's[22] 'Invented Traditions', where the authors argue that in the contemporary modern world, all traditions are invented, and 'authentic' ones no longer exist. However, this is predicated on the idea that somewhere, at some time, a 'true,' 'real' tradition formerly existed, and the contemporary one is fake and an ideological malformation.[23] Jacobs argues that modernity and tradition should both be seen as existing in the present, as a vibrant couplet where each part defines the other in a tension that is continuous and where meaning is always contested and changing. This is what makes tradition dynamic rather than static, and this is what allows it to change, alter, grow and develop.

20 Jane Jacobs, 'Tradition is (not) Modern: Deterritorializing Globalization', in *The End of Tradition*, ed. by Nizar al-Sayyad (New York: Routledge, 2004).

21 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

22 *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

23 Jacobs, 2004.

Several scholars have challenged the apparent stasis of this theoretical structure. In her article on 'Disappearing Dichotomies', Abu-Lughod argues against dichotomies between modernity and tradition. Instead, she proposes a re-conceptualisation of the term 'tradition' by focusing on process—what she calls 'traditioning'—rather than on tradition or the traditional.

Upton[24] also argues that looking for the pure or the 'authentic' can be both risky and unproductive. In his view, we should look for the contested, the multiple and the ambiguous. Al-Sayyad[25] argues that traditions must not be interpreted as static legacy of the past, as has been done by the Orientalist and modernist project, but rather as dynamic reinterpretations of the present.

Walsh argues that one of the key features of modem thinking is the philosophy of progress. He explains,

> An essential proposition of modem thought is an idea of progress, a belief which developed as a constituent part of Enlightenment thinking, and provided modem thinkers with a faith in the ability of humankind to manipulate and exploit their environments for the benefits of society. Such a society could escape from the debilitating elements of the past and could move forward to new horizons. If modernity has a particular essence, it is a belief in rational advancement through increments of perpetual improvement.[26]

This idea of progress emerged in the context of utopian beliefs about modernisation. This context associated the modem with the rational, the functional and the practical, in opposition to the pre-modem, which was supposedly irrational and random.

Buns and Kahn[27] argue that tradition is not frozen but always living, even if only minutely changing; people negotiate their lived spaces and contexts in terms of how traditional and modern they are. For instance, apparently modern space can be made traditional by human

24 Dell Upton, 'Authentic Anxieties' in *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage*, ed. by Nezar al-Sayyad (New York: Routledge, 2001).

25 al-Sayyad, 2001.

26 Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 5.

27 Carol J. Burns and Kahn Andrea, *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories, and Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

action and vice versa. Jemaa el-Fna Plaza is a good example to illustrate this argument, where it occurs in urban space. In Jemaa el-Fna Plaza, performers and workers dress in a typical precolonial dress that may be perceived as 'traditional clothing' or being 'traditional', but they live a modern life and use smartphones and smart devices.

Modernity is not a phenomenon that belongs to the 'West'. Nor is it perceived or experienced evenly all over the world. There are multiple 'modernities', and Morocco's modernity is different from that of other countries. Each one should be defined and understood in relation to its specific social and historical contexts.

3. Jemaa el-Fna Plaza: An illustrative case

Jemaa el-Fna Plaza is widely considered the most important symbolic landscape of Morocco. Since its foundation in the eleventh century by the Almoravid dynasty, it has been the most important part of the Marrakesh medina and one of its canonical sites. The origin and meaning of its name are unclear. In Arabic, *Jemaa* means congregation or mosque, and *el-Fna* means either death or a courtyard in front of a building. The plaza is a square and marketplace where local inhabitants and tourists gather to shop, eat or observe the various shows taking place. Inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List in 2001, it was presented and described in the official tourist narratives as a symbol of Moroccan life and emblematic of its traditions, it is also—ironically—presented as unique. The tourist brochures describe the site as mysterious, as a place where time has stopped, where tourists can get closer to the 'real Morocco' to be able to understand its culture and traditions. One such brochure proclaims, 'It is the ideal choice for all those enamoured of exoticism; for all incurable romantic dreamers'.[28]

Moroccan authorities and intellectuals see Jemaa el-Fna as an important component of national historical and cultural heritage. The rhetoric that constructs this site has its roots in the colonial period, as discussed above, and it is on such narratives that tourist brochures are based now. As a result of French colonial imaginary, Marrakesh

28 Alpitour tourist guide, edition 2005, p. 259.

in general, and Jemaa el-Fna specifically, has been presented by the Moroccan government and private tourism agencies as a land of myths.[29]

Fig. 9.1 Overview of Jemaa el-Fna Plaza. Author's photograph, 2021, CC BY-NC-ND.

Colonial narratives are used to construct and answer nostalgic questions by contemporary tourists, while presenting the heritage preservation discourses as anti-colonial. An illustrative example is the Francorosso Tours Guide, a major Italian operator. It states:

> No stay in Morocco is complete without a visit to Marrakesh, without immersing yourself in the magical atmosphere of its medina, the tortuous alleys of its countless souqs and its religious monuments [...]. The real soul of Marrakesh, the 'Red City,' can be found in the Jamaa el Fna [...] an open-air stage where every day an endless procession of storytellers, gymnasts, musicians, sellers, fire-eaters and snake charmers perform from morning to nightfall.[30]

Most international tourists faithfully follow the steps described in the guides used for their exploration of the medina. In Jemaa el-Fna, most prefer to sit in French-style cafes and gaze on the plaza from the higher point of view of the terraces. The reason for this, as explained by some international tourists, is twofold. Firstly, the terrace is the best place for a panoptic view of the plaza. Secondly, the encompassing vista allows the tourist to observe without being physically involved with the locals and their activities. Most use cameras to take pictures from the terraces, to freeze the plaza, to capture the square and 'immortalise' the Jemaa

29 *L'Appel du Maroc*, ed. by Daniel Rondeau (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).

30 Francorosso Tours Guide, 2005, p. 33.

el-Fna experience. Minca[31] states: 'The tourist-photographers are clearly very aware of their "appropriately" dominant position, of their choice of the right framing, the right perspective, at the right time of day'. Minca goes on to argue that this presents a landscape paradox in the plaza:

> On the one hand the tourists have to consciously position themselves atop a building in order to 'enjoy' the landscape and to frame it in appropriate fashion, in a clear effort at the 'manufacture' of a cultural product. On the other hand, however, with this gesture and with their photographs, they implicitly treat the landscape as an object, an object that can materially be found in Marrakesh, and captured/ reproduced in an infinity of ways.[32]

Thus, tourists are always creating and re-creating the landscape of the plaza. French-style cafes with terraces are sites built with the specific and explicit intent of allowing tourists to gaze upon the square and its spectacles, photographing and capturing it. These sites help establish a specific relation of power between the tourists and the square and therefore between the tourist and the locals. At the same time, cafes are part of Jemaa el-Fna's built environment and landscape. This is significant in the sense that they become part of essentialised site, reflecting the interplay and ambivalence of Jemaa el-Fna between a space that is supposedly purely Moroccan and a space consumed by tourists (and previously colonialists). This ambivalence contributes to the constituting and re-constituting of the identity of the square as landscape.

The colonial legacy is embodied in Jemaa el-Fna both by the European tourist, looking for a glorious Orientalised and exotic past, and by the Moroccan authorities, who try to construct national heritage and justify its preservation via the square.[33]

The locals and tourists experience and conceive the plaza in relation to specific places and spaces—imagined and real geographies—by mobilising a spatial theory of Self and Other relationships. The snake charmers, monkey dressers, storytellers, women who tattoo with

31 Claudio Minca, 'The Tourist Paradox', *Social and Cultural Geography,* 8:3 (2007), 443–453 (p. 444).

32 Ibid., p. 443.

33 Amina Touzani, *La Culture et la Politique Culturelle* (Casablanca: Croisée des chemins, 2003).

henna, dancers and others all work as professional performers at the plaza. In trying to attract tourists, they consciously use an Orientalist repertoire of activities and actions. Some of these play on the cultural differences between the performer and audience. They all consciously present themselves as the 'Oriental subject' for the tourist gaze, with an underlying economic motivation.

Most tourists let themselves enjoy the spectacle, possibly to make their experience of Jemaa el-Fna more richly exotic. However, this 'encounter' does not last long, and shortly after, it takes the form of a 'commercial transaction'.[34] The service has a price and demands payment. Minca comments on this moment of encounter, confirming that maybe 'sometimes in that instant, a doubt seizes both subjects; who is the colonizer and who is the colonized?'[35] This encounter allows both local performers and tourists to define themselves and the other in that specific place at that specific time. The ambivalence of the relationship between the locals and the tourists is crucial in shaping the way in which both of them experience the medina and its landscape in continuously changing and challenging ways.

Jemaa el-Fna is both traditional and modern, but it is a Moroccan modernity, not an imported, imposed modernity. It is the appropriation of the space and its intercalation with the users' cultural and social background, rather than only its physical and aesthetic features, that determines its meaning. Therefore, modernity cannot be approached as a style or conglomeration of physical features alone but must also be considered as a mode of living and of interacting with one's space, a landscape or built environment.

Conclusion

Under colonial rule, space and cultural heritage were used as means of power and domination. After independence, post (neo)-colonial space has always been contested and continuously reshaped. The problematic arising from an examination of such space consists of the means by which it is continuously negotiated. The question is whether

34 Minca, 2007.
35 Ibid., p. 444.

these neo-colonial spaces are constituted essentially by the binary opposition between the colonised and the coloniser, between tradition and modernity, or by a relationship that is more complex. This chapter has argued that modernity and tradition should not be approached as a binary opposition but rather as a vibrant couplet in which each defines the other and continuously shapes it.

In the case of Moroccan cities, it has been assumed that modernity or modernisation was the sole result of French colonial intervention. However, this cannot be true because the local notables and the local elites also contributed to this process of modernisation. They endeavoured to transform the body of the medina to better suit the European notion of progress. Jemaa el-Fna Plaza, in the Marrakesh medina, constitutes an interesting example to illustrate how an intangible heritage is at the same time a reflection of a tradition of pre-colonial conception and a construction of urban space on the one hand, and a fully contemporary public space that answers contemporary needs on the other. The old romantic image of Jemaa el-Fna Plaza now jars with the contemporary reality of a society continuously under construction.

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