

'Pilgrimage of the Poor'

Religious, Social and Political Dimensions of a Moroccan Local Pilgrimage

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Abstract: Pilgrimage destinations other than the Ka'aba in Mecca are a contested subject amongst Muslims. For the Moroccan 'poor', who are unable to perform the Meccan pilgrimage, a local pilgrimage known as the Hajj al-Miskin or the 'Pilgrimage of the Poor' is performed as an alternative spiritual journey. In this article, I discuss this pilgrimage at two sites in Morocco. Approaching Islam as a lived religion, I discuss how Moroccans navigate between religious considerations and the realities of everyday life. I argue that the Pilgrimage of the Poor plays a key role in the lives of the pilgrims at both the individual and community level. The debate about the Pilgrimage of the Poor reveals how different groups of Muslims negotiate their positions with respect to different interpretations of the global discursive tradition of Islam, applying these interpretations within their local context.

Keywords: Hajj, interpretation, Islam, Morocco, Pilgrimage of the Poor, ritual, saints

The Day of Arafah is the holiest day in the Islamic calendar, and refers to the second day of the Hajj pilgrimage, the fifth pillar of Islam. On the same day, hundreds of people also gather at sites in Morocco where they perform a ritual known locally as Hajj al-Miskin or the 'Pilgrimage of the Poor'. As its name indicates, this pilgrimage relates to the Hajj and – according to locals – is mainly performed by Moroccans who, for financial or other reasons, are unable to perform the Meccan pilgrimage.¹ The Hajj is one of the most significant ritual observations for Muslims, and its performance is mandatory once in a Muslim's lifetime for those who are physically and financially able. During my fieldwork studying the socio-cultural embeddedness of the Hajj in everyday Moroccan life, I participated in the Pilgrimage of the Poor at two



sites: Sidi Shashkal, which is located on the western coast of Morocco near the city of Safi, in 2016, and Sidi Bu Khiyar, which is located in the northern Rif Mountains, in 2018. I witnessed how pilgrims at these two sites imitated the Hajj ritual, asked for God's acceptance and forgiveness, and prayed for blessings for their children, health and wealth. At Sidi Shashkal, an old man said to me: 'May God accept our pilgrimage, the Pilgrimage of the Poor! This is our *hajj*. Like those performing *hajj* in Arafat near Mecca, we have our Arafat here . . . We all worship God'. Despite the opinion voiced by the old man, as well as by others who performed this pilgrimage, this ritual is contested by many Moroccans, some of whom expressed to me their fear that revealing these practices to a wider public might 'misrepresent Islam and religious life in Morocco' (see Al-Ajarma and Buitelaar 2021).

Besides the Hajj, the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Umra, the minor pilgrimage to Mecca, many Muslims perform non-*hajj* pilgrimages (often referred to as *ziyara*) at numerous rural and urban shrines called *zawaya* (sing. *zawiya*). A *zawiya* is often associated with a saint or holy person (*wali*), man or woman, and may contain that person's tomb (Chiffolleau and Madoeuf 2005). The *zawaya* are sometimes sites of celebrations or annual festivals, called *mawasim*, which are often (but not systematically) associated with Sufi masters (Eickelman 1976: 7).² Visiting saints' shrines is an extremely popular practice throughout the Islamic world, and such is the case in Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq and Iran, amongst others (Boissevain 2018). However, pilgrimage destinations other than the holy Ka'aba in Mecca are a controversial subject for some Muslims (see Boissevain 2018; Deeb 2006; and Schielke 2008).³

Morocco is home to hundreds of saints' shrines and sacred sites from ages past which are still visited by Moroccans (Bazzaz 2010; Cornell 1998). It is not the aim of this article to discuss the nature of sainthood in Morocco, a subject that has been treated in numerous academic works (such as those of Combs-Schilling 1989; Cornell 1998; Eickelman 1976; Gellner 1969; and Geertz 1968, to name but a few). Instead, my focus on the saints and visits to their shrines is related to the practice of the Pilgrimage of the Poor, which takes place at a specific time of the year and resonates with elements of the pilgrimage to Mecca (see Krediyeh 2011; and Hart 1976).⁴ My aim is to explore the relationship between this ritual and the social and political settings dominating the lives of Moroccan Muslims. Approaching Islam as a lived religion, I discuss how Moroccans navigate between religious considerations on the one hand and the concerns, aspirations and realities of their everyday lives on the other (see Schielke 2009, 2010). I argue that the Pilgrimage of the Poor plays a key role in the lives of those who practise it at both the individual and community level.

Situating the pilgrimage in a geographically and historically wider context of 'substitute rituals' (see Petersen 2017), I first introduce, in narrative form, the pilgrimage rituals which take place at the sites of Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar in comparison with the Meccan pilgrimage. I then discuss the

significance of the local pilgrimage at the individual level as a religious duty and as a collective practice. Following this, I offer a presentation of different views or perceptions of this pilgrimage in the wider Moroccan society. Lastly, I consider how the Pilgrimage of the Poor is not simply of religious significance but yields important political messages.

The Pilgrimage of the Poor: Rituals that Imitate the Meccan Pilgrimage

Identity and Origin

The sites of Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar are deserted for most of the year, outside of the pilgrimage season. Sidi Shashkal is located around 40 kilometres from the city of Safi on the west coast of Morocco. The shrine of Sidi Shashkal consists of a one room-building located on top of a large rock often buffeted by the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. It is the only building in the area within a rather large circumference. Sidi Bu Khiyar is located at the highest point in the Jbil Hmam deep in the Rif Mountains some two thousand metres above sea level. The shrine consists of a small rectangular structure of mud and stone where Sidi Bu Khiyar is believed to be buried and – on the actual pinnacle of the Jbil Hmam – a ruined structure where a female saint, Lalla Mannana, is said to be buried.⁵ It takes a few hours to drive from the city of El Hoceima to reach the site of Sidi Bu Khiyar.

The origin of the pilgrimage to the sites of Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar is not well known amongst Moroccans. Nonetheless, pilgrims at both sites shared with me some stories about the roots of the ritual that takes place there. One of the stories referred to the historical period between the eleventh and the nineteenth centuries, when some legal opinions discouraged or even prohibited the pilgrimage to Mecca (see Hendrickson 2016).⁶ These legal opinions were justified by references to the risks linked to long-distance travel from Morocco (and North Africa in general) to Mecca at the time.⁷ As a result of the prohibition of travel to Mecca, some interlocutors claimed, local citizens looked for alternatives and started performing local pilgrimages close to their communities. Amongst those pilgrims I met at the pilgrimage sites, very little was known about Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar beyond the fact that both were a *wali salih*, a 'saint'. I was told that Sidi Shashkal had let Moroccans travelling to Mecca use his shrine as site for practising *hajj* rituals. According to local pilgrims, both sites possessed great *baraka*, or 'blessings', which made them suitable to function as pilgrimage places for those unable to travel to Mecca. Therefore, since the Hajj to Mecca remains beyond the capacity of many Moroccans today, many people choose to participate in the Pilgrimage of the Poor, which provides them with much-needed religious and social capital (see Bourdieu 1986).⁸

Pilgrimage Performed

The two pilgrimages at Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar take place on the ninth day of Dhu l-Hijja, the second day of the Hajj, when pilgrims gather in the Plain of Arafat southeast of Mecca from noon to sunset in a rite known as *al-wuquf* ('standing before God'). When I joined the two local pilgrimages, I witnessed the gathering of groups of people of different ages who had come from villages and towns near the western coast of Morocco, in the case of Sidi Shashkal, and from the north – mainly the Amazigh (Berber) Rif region – in the case of Sidi Bu Khiyar.⁹ At Sidi Shashkal, I joined in the rites which included walking anti-clockwise around the four-sided packed-earth building covered by a *qubba*, or 'dome', located on large rocks at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean (Figs 1 and 2). The walking can arguably qualify as an imitation of the ritual of circumambulating the Ka'aba, which is a mandatory rite of the Meccan pilgrimage. Whilst a few pilgrims circled the shrine seven times, as in Mecca, most people seemed satisfied with one or two rounds, after which they sat at a distance observing the others. Some pilgrims then prayed at the site, standing on the ruins of a building which they called 'Arafah' (or 'Arafat'). This rite of standing entailed a reference to the Plain of Arafat near Mecca where pilgrims perform the rite of standing on the same day. Following these rites, many people washed themselves in the Atlantic Ocean. One of the pilgrims



Figure 1. The shrine of Sidi Shashkal (pilgrims climb a few steps to enter the shrine whilst a few pilgrims circle the building, which serves as a makeshift Ka'aba. There is a derelict room on top of the rock called 'Arafah', where pilgrims stand, imitating the ritual of standing at the Hajj proper which takes place on the same day, on the Day of Arafat. © Kholoud Al-Ajarma, 2016.

told me that in the past, before a nearby well, which was called 'Zamzam', dried up some years ago, people used to drink its water and linked its significance to the holy water of the Zamzam Well from which pilgrims drink during the Hajj.

The ritual I witnessed at Sidi Bu Khiyar included circling, or standing near, the site of Lalla Mannana, who, according to pilgrims I met at the site, was



Figure 2. The path which leads down to the site of Sidi Shashkal. On top, hundreds of people shop for Aïd-el-Kébir necessities from the numerous stalls set up for the day. © Kholoud Al-Ajarma, 2016.

a companion of Sidi Bu Khiyar. Circumambulating or standing around her tomb, like the ritual which took place near Sidi Shashkal, was an imitation of the rites of the Hajj taking place in and around Mecca. Inside the shrine of Sidi Bu Khiyar, I observed two men who stood behind the tomb of the saint and recited Quranic verses and other prayers for a sick child carried by her mother. Outside, in the open space at the peak of the mountain, hundreds of people gathered around a group of around 40 men dressed in white. Those men were the *tulba*, Quran reciters, who, since the morning, had gathered to recite from the Quran for the public.¹⁰ They also went through the litany, or *dhikr*, a devotional act in which phrases or prayers are repeated in remembrance of God.

In addition to the pilgrimage rituals taking place at Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar, a range of activities were organised at the two sites. For example, pilgrims could shop from numerous stalls where items such as matches, candles, soap, coal, meat, fish, fruit and vegetables, and clothes were sold in preparation for Aïd-el-Kébir, the Feast of Sacrifice, on the following day (Fig. 3). Moreover, many people were entertained by gathering in circles, listening to fortune tellers, asking about the future, and inquiring about the possibility of finding a wife or a husband. The sites were also spaces for leisure time, including swimming (near Sidi Shashkal), engaging in conversations and relaxing.¹¹



Figure 3. People gather around the *tulba* in the open market on the mountain near the pilgrimage site. © Kholoud Al-Ajarma, 2018.

Debating the Equivalence of the Pilgrimage of the Poor and the Hajj

The Pilgrimage of the Poor, according to local pilgrims, has primarily a religious dimension, which they associate with the Meccan pilgrimage. The pilgrims I met at Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar insisted on the sacred nature of the site they visited and on the value of the pilgrimage. Although each of the pilgrims I approached had a personal rationale for participating in the pilgrimage, they mostly saw themselves as Muslims performing a pilgrimage which they prayed would be accepted by God. Many pilgrims told me that they were aware of the difference between their local pilgrimage and the pilgrimage to Mecca. While they would have wished to participate in the Meccan pilgrimage, some pilgrims argued that sincere intentions behind performing the local pilgrimage produced equal merit to that of performing the Hajj. An old man I met at Sidi Shashkal derived this perspective from the Islamic concept of *niyya*, or 'sincere intention.' He asserted that God's acceptance and forgiveness would be based on the pilgrims' and supplicants' intentions, not the fact that they did not visit Mecca. *Niyya* is a concept which features prominently in texts about Islamic ritual law that discuss acts of worship and ritual duties including prayer, fasting and pilgrimage (see Petersen 2017: 107–109; and Powers 2004: 425). In the case of pilgrims performing the Pilgrimage of the Poor, their insistence on the importance of their *niyya* was combined with their assertion that God and 'God alone . . . is the One to judge the quality of [their] practice'.

Pilgrims find in the Pilgrimage of the Poor a way to navigate religious and mundane moral registers (see Al-Ajarma 2020a). Despite the absence of religious authority for this ritual, pilgrims used their own agency to justify the value of their pilgrimage. As a man who I met at Sidi Shashkal told me:

Both those who make the pilgrimage to Mecca and those who make this pilgrimage do it to seek God's blessings. The poor people who cannot afford to go to Mecca come here with the same motives. . . . God knows what people ardently desire and He forgives their sins. Indeed, we are all pilgrims!

Similar narratives were repeated by other pilgrims, who asserted the primacy of sincere motivation and conformity to broader Islamic imperatives as factors which God would judge. They asserted the idea that God judges people through criteria which supersede material considerations; God was understood to accept the offerings of the poor – whatever they might be – as being equally valid to those of the more fortunate, who could afford to visit Mecca.¹² The rituals performed at the sites of the Hajj al-Miskin reveal that, for local pilgrims, the meaning ingrained in the pilgrimage could be attained through other meaningful activities that could be performed at the same time as the Meccan pilgrimage but in another location. This enabled Moroccans at Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar to feel that they belonged to the broader Muslim

community despite their inability to reach Mecca. As I have related, like those in Mecca, local pilgrims perform several interconnected rites such as circumambulation, standing in a place (known as 'Arafah'), and drinking the water from a local well they called 'Zamzam'.

In addition to its religious significance, the Pilgrimage of the Poor has a particular social function, which is to offer a means by which the socio-economically disadvantaged may feel able to approach God by performing a pilgrimage. For some local pilgrims, the ritual was a means for engaging with the broader Muslim community and an opportunity for ethical self-improvement. An elderly man at Sidi Shashkal told me: 'We are pilgrims . . . when we come here . . . we ask for stronger faith (*iman*), we ask for *halal* food and life, and we ask for a solution to daily misfortune and perplexity'. For other individuals, the gathering contributed to feelings of solidarity through the collective experience (see Nejad 2019). One example was Yassir, a 52-year-old man from Casablanca who had travelled to Sidi Shashkal for the day of the pilgrimage. At the individual level, Yassir wanted to escape the busy life of the city, have some rest and participate in the ritual to calm his mind. He also wanted to 'share the experience with other Moroccans coming to perform the pilgrimage'.

Although Muslims do not *have* to go on the Hajj if they are not able to, in a social context where pilgrims – those who have performed the Hajj in Mecca – enjoy special prestige and significant social capital in Moroccan society, the Pilgrimage of the Poor becomes an alternative for those who do not have access to such capital (see Al-Ajarma 2021). I have argued elsewhere that the pilgrimage to Mecca evokes a number of social and religious sentiments as a transformative experience on both the personal and social level, shaping potential spiritual transformation and the elevation of social status (Al-Ajarma 2020a). There seemed to be a similar sentiment circulating amongst those who performed the Pilgrimage of the Poor at the social and spiritual level. Socially, it was an opportunity to meet other Moroccans, engage in discussions and reflect on their personal and collective experience. Spiritually, the pilgrimage seemed to inspire inner and outer transformation that reflected their effort to be 'good Muslims' (Beekers and Kloos 2017; Schielke 2010).

Furthermore, the power of a shrine, according to Julian Eade and Michael Sallnow, 'derives in large part from its character almost as a religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices' (1991: 15). The religious void, for local pilgrims, I argue, is their inability to perform the Meccan pilgrimage. The Hajj today is easier to carry out than ever before due to the advent of modern technologies, new modes of transportation and the rise of a middle class that has placed the Hajj within reach of increasing numbers of Muslim pilgrims (see Mols and Buitelaar 2015). Nevertheless, for most Moroccans who wish to perform the pilgrimage, Mecca is still beyond reach. Their gender, financial situation, health issues or the quota and *qur'a* systems, do not work in their favour (see Al-Ajarma 2020b). In these cases, the everyday lives of Moroccans are open to contestations and innovations as

mechanisms by which people manage their spiritual ambitions and religiosity. While Islamic scriptures clearly provide authoritative references, releasing those who are unable to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca from that religious duty, the ways in which Muslims interpret their inability to perform the pilgrimage can vary widely. They may include local pilgrimages as an alternative to the Meccan pilgrimage. Despite the diverse meanings of the Pilgrimage of the Poor to those performing this ritual, it seemed to me that people experienced comfort for two reasons: for being removed from the general social situation in which the poor know themselves to be judged, explicitly or implicitly, as inferior by their richer fellow citizens and for making an attempt, at least, to compensate for failing to perform the much-coveted Hajj.

Competing Framings Supporting and Rejecting the Pilgrimage of the Poor

Despite the significance of the Pilgrimage of the Poor to those performing it, many pilgrims at Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar expressed their wish to travel to Mecca to perform the Hajj. Many pilgrims told me that they would prioritise travelling to Mecca for a pilgrimage if they could, but in as much as they are financially unable to travel they nevertheless expected God's forgiveness and all the associated rewards of pilgrimage (see Al-Ajarma 2020a: 168–170). However, away from the sites of the pilgrimage, many Moroccans voiced to me their rejection of the Pilgrimage of the Poor. Some deem it to be not a religious ritual but 'a sign of religious ignorance', as I was often told. Other Moroccans argued that although the Pilgrimage of the Poor attracts hundreds, or even thousands, of Moroccans, the number is minimal compared with more than two million people who travel to Mecca every year for the Hajj. Furthermore, the Hajj is a mandatory duty for Muslims who are financially and physically able and has great spiritual and religious significance for Muslims, whilst the Pilgrimage of the Poor is a minor local practice. Therefore, comparing the two pilgrimages – in the view of sceptical Moroccans – was unjustified. In the following narrative, I recount a conversation with some friends in the city of Safi, which revealed some of the antagonistic attitudes that this ritual often raised. The conversation took place in Fatiha's house, where her sister Rasmiya, her son Musa and her older brother Hassan, in addition to me, were present:

Fatiha (addressing me after offering some water and dates): This is *real* Zamzam water which was brought from Mecca by my brother who performed the Umra in Ramadan. [Jokingly:] Should I call you *al-hajja* now that you've participated in the Pilgrimage of the Poor?

Musa [who had accompanied me throughout the day, answered his mother's question]: Me too! You should call me *al-hajj* [and added jokingly] now that I have performed my Hajj even before you.

Fatiha: One day, God-willing, I will go to the *real Hajj* to visit Mecca, Medina and the Prophet . . . What are people doing there, at this place of Sidi Shashkal? You know that Mecca is the only place for pilgrimage recognised by God.

Hassan: It would be better for people to abandon such *bid'a* ['heretical'] practices . . . That's not Islam. Not pilgrimage! I don't understand why people still do it, then.

Musa: People told us they pray to God to accept their visit and make prayers similar to those of pilgrims in Mecca.

Fatiha: I think it is all *jahl* ['ignorance' or 'illiteracy']! Those who want to do the pilgrimage should go to Mecca; it is not obligatory to do the Hajj if one is not able, anyway.

Musa: An old man told us: 'This is our Hajj; God will accept it, because we all worship God!'

Fatiha: This is not Islam; this is *haram* ['taboo'].

The critical opinions voiced in this conversation by Fatiha and Hassan illustrate the differing views on the Pilgrimage of the Poor. Fatiha, for example, identified the practices of those who perform the Pilgrimage of the Poor as taboo, *haram*, and not Islamic. Her opinion also implies that the people who performed this form of pilgrimage were ignorant of what she identified as 'correct' religious practice, referring to them as 'illiterate' and 'ignorant'. In their argument, Fatiha and Hassan refer to Islam and Quranic verses, using such authorities to bolster their argument and prove that the Pilgrimage of the Poor is to be avoided.

Many others amongst my interlocutors, especially those from urban, educated and middle-class backgrounds, condemned the Pilgrimage of the Poor and described it as being *shirk* ('polytheism'), *jahl* ('ignorance')¹³ or *tkharbiq* ('foolish'). These views might be related to orthodox teachings of Islam concerning local cults around Muslim saints in different parts of the world (see Stauth and Schielke 2008). Another observation during my fieldwork was that those who condemned or looked down on the Pilgrimage of the Poor were reflecting the social order and class distinctions in Morocco. On several occasions, I was told, mostly by middle-class Moroccans, that those who perform the Pilgrimage of the Poor were not educated and were financially poor. Also, the criticism of pilgrims using terms such as *jahl* ('ignorance'), *tkharbiq* ('foolish') by inference seemed to signify class differences.

Many Moroccans amongst this group of interlocutors advised me against writing about this topic, as 'it expressed a misrepresentation of Islam' and 'might bring Islam as practised in Morocco into disrepute'. What I witnessed often in these social circles was – in my opinion – a resultant defensiveness and desire to present Islam in Morocco in the best light possible. Some people even quoted from the Quran and the Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, to validate their points. For example, in numerous conversations, people narrated the *hadith* which sanctioned journeying (*shadd al-rihal*) to mosques other than al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in

Medina and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.¹⁴ While the Hajj is a universal ritual, the Pilgrimage of the Poor lacks scriptural authority.

This debate about the Pilgrimage of the Poor reveals how different groups of Muslims negotiate their positions with respect to different interpretations of the global discursive tradition of Islam, applying these interpretations within their local contexts. For those who perform the Pilgrimage of the Poor, not only does it offer a much-needed sense of spiritual achievement which would otherwise be denied to them, but they are also *agents*, actively engaging in ritual and interpreting their practice by negotiating their position in a society where they are socially marginalised. Local pilgrims actively engage in interpreting the ritual in relation to the Meccan pilgrimage and negotiating their position as Muslims performing an alternative Hajj.

The Pilgrimage of the Poor Informing Social and Political Mobility

In addition to the religious and social significance of the Pilgrimage of the Poor, this ritual can also reflect a political dimension which points to the multivocality of the pilgrimage (see Rodman 2003: 205). I witnessed aspects of this political dimension when I participated in the pilgrimage at Sidi Bu Khiyar, which has become a hub for social activities with a political undercurrent in a region which is under strict police surveillance. Although the 'legacies of contention' in the region are not new, the recent unrest in the Rif region dates to October 2016 when a fish-vendor from El Hoceima was crushed to death following the confiscation of his fish by a policeman (Wolf 2019). Since then, the Rif area has been a site for a protest movement which came to be known as Hiraq al-Rif, or the Rif Movement, seeking justice for the fish-vendor's family and denouncing the marginalisation and exclusion (*hugra*) by Morocco's central government that the area has undergone for years (Masbah 2017). The government dismissed the grievances of the Rif citizens and arrested the main activists of the protest movement, some of whom were sentenced in 2017 to up to 20 years in jail. Although the protests faded after 2017, strict police surveillance continued to counter any form of community mobilisation. Therefore, a gathering like the one which took place at Sidi Bu Khiyar became an event 'much anticipated by the people of the Rif', as I was told on the day of the pilgrimage.

The three men, Adil, Jawad and Abdul Razzaq, whom I accompanied on this journey, told me that they made the three-hour journey through the mountains of the Rif to reach Sidi Bu Khiyar so that they could witness the massive community gathering at the site. Abdul Razzaq was the father of one of the young leaders of Hiraq al-Rif and was greeted with great enthusiasm by both young and older people. Men and women approached him to show their respect; older men hugged him and younger ones kissed him on the forehead, a sign of respect and admiration. Numerous young people posed for 'selfie'

pictures with the older man and posted those pictures on social media immediately. Abdul Razzaq was asked about his son, who is now serving 20 years in prison, and many made *du'a* prayers for the continued maintenance of his physical well-being and his release alongside other Rif prisoners.

The social solidarity found amongst local pilgrims at Sidi Bu Khiyar resonates with the notion of 'collective effervescence' first introduced by Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1965). According to Durkheim, collective effervescence is a powerful group sentiment that occurs in religious assemblies because of the shared activities and values of those in attendance. Durkheim claims the experience of collective effervescence serves the social functions of revitalising the spiritual beliefs of the group and cultivating feelings of social solidarity amongst its members ([1912] 1965: 419–422). Expressions of solidarity were apparent in the discussions among local pilgrims who talked about the recent social and political events in the Rif region, discussed the struggle of political prisoners and performed the pilgrimage ritual – all under the eyes of the police.

Unlike the pilgrimage at Sidi Shashkal, where no police monitored the gathering, large groups of police were present at the site of Sidi Bu Khiyar. The heavy police presence was explained by the local pilgrims in two ways. The first explanation related to the nature of the pilgrimage. As I was told, during the previous year's pilgrimage, 'a group of religious men visited the site and tried to prevent people from performing the Pilgrimage of the Poor by force, decreeing that there was no substitute for the pilgrimage to Mecca, which resulted in a conflict among the pilgrims'. Therefore, the police were thought to be present this year to avoid similar incidents. The second explanation, and the one considered more credible by the pilgrims, was related to the political unrest in the Rif, where all communal gatherings were monitored closely by the police. On the surface of it, however, the surveillance by the police did not seem to affect the proceedings of the pilgrimage: people seemed relaxed and close to each other, and they performed the rites of their pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage at Sidi Bu Khiyar, thus, represented not only a ritual which connected local pilgrims with the pilgrimage taking place in Mecca but was also a medium to connect with and reflect on the political reality on the ground. Similar to other saints' shrines in Morocco, those who visited Sidi Bu Khiyar considered it to be a site of safety and protection where pilgrims could reconcile social and political conflicts (see El Mansour 1999: 185–198). Therefore, pilgrims could freely discuss the political conditions in the region and display symbols of their Amazigh identity. For example, many young people showed up in t-shirts imprinted with the Amazigh flag, which consists of a blue, green and yellow band, respectively representing the sea, the land and the desert, in addition to the letter *yaz* (ⵣ) featured in red, which represented 'freedom' or 'free man' amongst the Amazigh community. The Amazigh flag and the letter *yaz* (ⵣ) emerged as symbols of the Amazigh struggle in the Rif protest movement. Another local symbol was the phrase '*asha l-rif*' ('long live

the Rif?') with which Adil and Jawad used to greet pilgrims at Sidi Bu Khiyar. Jawad told me: 'Every Riffian who comes to Sidi Bu Khiyar wants to connect with our sacred land'. This connection, at least in its physical sense, came to a halt by mid-afternoon as the ritual of pilgrimage ended and people started to leave. By the evening, Adil commented: 'Sidi Bu Khiyar will now be deserted, until next year, when on the Day of Arafat, the devoted, pious pilgrims will return to perform the ritual of the Pilgrimage of Poor'.

Conclusion

At the sites Sidi Shashkal and Sidi Bu Khiyar, where I witnessed this local ritual, pilgrims gathered on the Day of Arafat and performed rites similar to those taking place in or near Mecca during the Hajj. The ritual parallels between the Hajj and the Pilgrimage of the Poor can be found in the circum-ambulating, standing, and drinking water from a sacred well. By reflecting on the rituals taking place at the two sites, I have argued that the Pilgrimage of the Poor is an event through which local pilgrims exercise religious agency through their ability to perform a ritual which, according to many pilgrims, is equal to that performed in Mecca. This religious agency also allows pilgrims to negotiate the changes in their status as pilgrims amongst their community, or in their status as aspirant pilgrims unable to achieve their ambition through the usual route, by finding spiritual satisfaction in an alternative manner. In their description of the ritual, local pilgrims provided reference to and expressed longing for a journey to Mecca which they could not embark on. Their local ritual alleviated some of their daily concerns and stressed the importance of their connection with the global Muslim ritual taking place in Mecca. The local pilgrimage connected Moroccans to the larger Muslim world through its performance and communication of a sense of communal identification with other pilgrims at the site.

Despite the positive interpretations and many benefits of the Pilgrimage of the Poor described by those who performed the ritual, other Moroccans voiced their rejection of such practices. Some deemed the Pilgrimage of the Poor to be a sign of religious ignorance and, by definition, a ritual exclusive to the 'poor'. This contestation about the Pilgrimage of the Poor amongst Moroccans reveals how different groups of Muslims negotiate their positions with respect to different interpretations of Islamic rituals within their local contexts, including the pilgrimage. Nonetheless, for those who perform the Pilgrimage of the Poor, these rituals offer a sense of religious achievement within the existing social and financial constraints in their everyday lives. Both groups treated the Hajj as an important activity that embodied deep religious meaning and brought with it rich communal and individual interactions.

In the last section, I discussed how, in addition to its religious and social significance, the Pilgrimage of the Poor – in the case of Sidi Bu Khiyar – represented

a means of political mobilisation and collective effervescence within existing restrictions, consistent with Durkheim's notion of 'collective effervescence'. I showed how the performance of the pilgrimage ritual is never isolated from the social and political setting in which it takes place. In the Rif region, where political activism is monitored by the state, the Pilgrimage of the Poor became a site of safety and protection where local pilgrims could gather freely, discuss their concerns and challenge the status quo.

What the Pilgrimage of the Poor reflects is how Islam is being negotiated in the everyday lives of Muslims in Morocco. It can be interpreted as a response to non-negotiable social constraints and an assertion of the value of the devotional activities of the socially marginalised. The Pilgrimage of the Poor, then, is a practice that can take various forms and that involves elements of ritual, religious belief, social significance and, in some instances, also politics.

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Notes

1. There is a range of academic studies that look at Muslim pilgrimage through various lenses, for instance in relation to tourism (Jamal et al. 2018; Timothy and Olsen 2006), historical encounters (Ryad 2016), and globalisation (Bianchi 2004; Hyndman-Rizk 2012; McIntosh et al. 2018). Other significant studies include Buitelaar et al. (2020); McLoughlin (2009, 2010, 2013); Mols and Buitelaar (2015); and Rahimi and Eshaghi (2019).

2. *Mawsim* is the plural form of *mawsim* (or *musim* in Moroccan Arabic) and refers to annual regional festivals that combine religious celebration (often to honour a saint) with festive and commercial activities (see Schielke 2008, 2012).
3. Some Muslim jurists such as Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) saw an inherent tension between the Hajj – as the only legitimate pilgrimage to Islam's most holy city, Mecca – and *ziyara* since, they argued, such practices contradicted the unity of God and associated earthly substance with intercession and reverence for shrines with divine transcendence (Boissevain 2018; Rahimi and Eshaghi 2019).
4. A saint is a person, elect in the eyes of God, whose life is an example unto his or her people. For more on saints in Africa, see Soares (2004) and Schulz (2003).
5. In his book, David Hart (1976) describes the site of Sidi Bu Khiyāar and refers to Mannana as 'Aralla Yamna'. Lalla is a prefix used with a woman's name as a sign of respect, and it means 'lady' in Tamazight, or Berber. It is used for female saints the same way Moulay or Sidi is used for male saints.
6. Some Muslim jurists working within the Maliki School of law have been discouraging or prohibiting the pilgrimage to Mecca for Andalusian and North African Muslims since at least the eleventh century. When the Almoravid ruler asked Ibn Rushd al-Jadd if *jihad* or the Hajj is more meritorious for Andalusians, Ibn Rushd protested that the answer was obvious. He stated that the merits of *jihad* are innumerable, while Moroccans are all exempt from the Hajj because of their inability to perform it; furthermore, Muslims risking the dangerous journey would incur sin (Hendrickson 2016). Jurist Ibn al-Munayyir prohibited the pilgrimage for anyone who feared he might delay or mis-pray even one daily prayer on the journey. Another scholar, Ahmad al-Burzuli, in his voluminous *fatwa* compilation, includes more opinions discouraging the Hajj than describing its proper performance (Hendrickson 2016).
7. The Maliki School is one of the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence within Sunni Islam. It was founded by Malik ibn Anas in the eighth century. It is the official Islamic school in Morocco and in most Muslim countries of North Africa (see Abun-Nasr 1987).
8. The restrictions of the Hajj for Moroccans include the expensive costs of the pilgrimage and the imposed quota system that allows only a small number of applicants to be issued with a Hajj visa (see Bianchi 2004: 11).
9. The Amazigh or Berber are the indigenous people of Morocco. Although 'Berber' is a more universally known term, I refer to them as 'Amazigh', which is the term they use to describe themselves.
10. This term, *tulba* (sing. *talib*), literally means 'students'. In Morocco, *tulba* refers to students of Quran who are specialised in group recitation at ceremonies such as weddings and funerals (see Mateo Dieste 2013).
11. The Rif Movement (known as Hirak al-Rif or Hirak for short) is a popular protest movement that took place in the Rif region in Northern Morocco between October 2016 and June 2017 as a result of the death of Mohcine Fikri, a local fishmonger who was crushed to death in a garbage truck following the confiscation of his fish merchandise by local authorities. The mass protest movement was suppressed violently with the arrest of more than 150 Moroccans seen by the regime as protagonists/leaders or media activists in the movement (see Masbah 2017; and Wolf 2019).

12. There are other pilgrimages similar to that of the Pilgrimage of the Poor outside of Morocco such as the pilgrimage to the Sheikh Nur Hussein Shrine in Eastern Ethiopia and Yenihan Baba in Bulgaria (see Zarcone 2012).
13. There are no universal definitions and standards of literacy. However, illiteracy rates in the Moroccan national census are based on the most common definition – the ability to read and write at a specific age. The High Commission for Planning census of 2014 estimates illiteracy rates at 32 per cent of the adult population. Illiteracy is more common in adults over 50 years old at 61.1 per cent and more common amongst females compared to males (Hemidach 2015).
14. In the Hadith, it has been narrated that the Prophet said: ‘Do not set out on a journey except for three Mosques, that is, al-Masjid al-Haram, the Mosque of God’s Messenger (in Medina) and the al-Aqsa Mosque (Mosque of Jerusalem)’ (Al-Bukhari, Book 20, Hadith 2).

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