

"The Interplay of Sacred and Profane in Moroccan Cinema: Portrayals of Sainthood in 'The Unknown Saint' Film"



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ABSTRACT: This study conducts a thorough examination of the portrayal of sainthood in Moroccan cinema, probing whether it accentuates the secular or divine aspects of this spiritual tradition. By closely analyzing Alaa Eddine Eljem's film "The Unknown Saint," we delve into how its storyline navigates the intricate interplay between social and religious dynamics within Moroccan society. Set against the captivating backdrop of Agafay desert near Marrakech, the film unveils the tale of a thief who inadvertently buries stolen money in a remote hill, later designated by villagers as a tomb that evolves into a revered shrine for a saint. This narrative unravels themes of spirituality, tradition, and societal complexities. With a skilled ensemble cast led by Anas Elbaz and Saleh ben Saleh, the film emerges as a groundbreaking exploration of sainthood within Moroccan cinematic landscape. Beyond its central plot, it addresses pertinent issues such as healthcare, drought, and superstition, offering audiences a profound contemplation of Moroccan identity and culture. Through our analysis, we aim to deepen insights into how Moroccan cinema grapples with the intricate nuances of Sufism and its enduring relevance in contemporary Moroccan society.

KEYWORDS: Moroccan Cinema, Profane and Sacred, Sufism, Sainthood, Popular beliefs, Saint Veneration

1. BACKGROUND

Cinema emerges as a transformative medium challenging traditional perceptions of saints and their lodges by confronting the mythical, superstitious, and ritualistic aspects associated with them. In several film productions, there is an implicit critique of the unquestioning belief in human superpowers and the magical attributes attributed to saints. This includes notions of healing and solving various social ills or natural phenomena, such as drought. Cinematic narratives often scrutinize these beliefs, inviting audiences to question and reflect on the supernatural elements attached to saintly figures. Contrastingly, television programs tend to emphasize the festive and celebratory dimensions of sainthood. These programs amplify the communal aspects, portraying saintly practices as occasions for joyous gatherings and vibrant festivities. This study aims to delve into the divergent approaches employed by television and cinema in framing and addressing saints and brotherhood.

The thematic analysis of this study will be anchored by the acclaimed film "The Unknown Saints," which serves as a pivotal backdrop for our exploration into cinematic representations of saints. Through a deep examination of this film's content, we aim to extract valuable insights into how cinema confronts and reinterprets traditional perspectives on saintly figures. Notably, the film appears to interrogate and challenge the prevalent belief in miracles and supernatural powers commonly associated with saints. Numerous scenes throughout the narrative allude to this underlying theme, prompting a closer examination of the film's nuanced portrayal of such challenges. Thus, a thematic analysis of this production becomes essential in unraveling its subtleties and discerning the ways in which it navigates the complex intersections of faith, belief, and skepticism.

2. INTRODUCTION

Sainthood often embodies a dual nature, encompassing both the sacred and the profane. The sacred aspect is intertwined with the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Sainthood, while the profane is associated with certain traditions and rituals characterized by unconventional practices. The distinction between the two can become blurred, with spiritual and profane activities occurring within the same lodge and around the same saint. While some individuals may view the saint as a paragon of education and virtue, others seek spiritual blessings (baraka) from the same figure through questionable means. Requests for blessings may range from seeking rain to divine intervention, with somehow superstitious methods often employed to achieve these ends.

"The Interplay of Sacred and Profane in Moroccan Cinema: Portrayals of Sainthood in 'The Unknown Saint' Film"

This article endeavors to shed light on how Moroccan cinema navigates the complex terrain of sainthood, examining whether it predominantly focuses on the profane or the sacred aspects of this spiritual tradition. Through a comprehensive content analysis of the film "The Unknown Saint," we aim to uncover how its themes intertwine with one of the most challenging subjects to address: the intersection of social and religious dynamics within Moroccan society. Of particular interest is the filmmaker's approach to depicting the beliefs and practices of individuals, offering valuable insights into the intricacies of Sufi culture. By delving into these cinematic representations, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of how Moroccan cinema grapples with the multifaceted dimensions of Sufism and its significance in the lives of Moroccans.

The case study centers around the film "The Unknown Saint," directed by Alaa Eddine Eljem and featuring a talented cast of Moroccan actors, including Anas Elbaz as the doctor and Saleh ben Saleh as the brain and planner. Shot in Agafay desert near Marrakech, the film stands as a pioneering work in its exploration of Sainthood within Moroccan cinema. At its core is the character portrayed by Youness Bouab, a thief who inadvertently transforms a stolen cache of money into a revered shrine for the entire village. Beyond its exploration of Sainthood, the film delves into various other themes such as healthcare issues, the impact of drought, and the prevalence of superstition. Through its compelling narrative and evocative cinematography, "The Unknown Saint" offers viewers a thought-provoking exploration of these interconnected themes, weaving together elements of spirituality, tradition, and societal dynamics against the backdrop of the Moroccan desert.

3. HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1. Hypothesis

Moroccan cinema offers a refreshing departure from the conventional association of sainthood with the supernatural realm, disrupting entrenched beliefs in superpowers and miraculous feats attributed to saints.

3.2. Research questions

This paper sets out to address several key research questions regarding the portrayal of sainthood in Moroccan cinema. Firstly, it seeks to explore the manner in which cinema depicts sainthood and the nuances involved in its representation. Additionally, the paper examines whether cinema tends to be more daring in shedding light on taboo aspects associated with sainthood. Through an in-depth thematic analysis, this study aims to provide insights into the diverse approaches and perspectives adopted by cinema in portraying the complex concept of sainthood in Moroccan culture.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When discussing sainthood in Morocco, it's crucial to acknowledge the prominence of major Sufi orders like the Bouctchichiya¹, the Tijania², and the Chadhilia³. While these orders often dominate discussions on sainthood, it's important not to overlook the contributions of other Sufi orders, both locally and globally. This research emphasizes the portrayal of these debates within Moroccan cinema. It seeks to explore how cinema shapes and presents discussions on sainthood in Morocco. By examining cinematic perspectives, the research aims to uncover the complex ways in which cinema influences the narrative on Sufism and sainthood, providing a nuanced understanding of their portrayal in contemporary society.

Existing scholarly works on Sainthood often scrutinize the state's use of the master-and-disciple model to reinforce power dynamics between political leaders and their subjects. However, scant attention has been paid to the role of TV and cinema as primary contributors to this dynamic. Scholars like Malika Zaghal (2009), Abdellah Hammoudi (1997), and Fait Muedini (2015) have explored this theme, underscoring how the masses succumb to the influence of religious and spiritual elements wielded by political leaders. This article seeks to redirect attention towards the intervention of cinema in shaping the relationship between the masses and Sainthood. It specifically examines instances where cinema contribute to the dynamics of this relationship, shedding light on their role in influencing perceptions and narratives surrounding Sufism and Sainthood.

The understanding of Moroccan culture, particularly Sufism within the Moroccan context, has indeed been shaped significantly by the reflections and writings of various scholars. This is evident in the early works of writers such as Paul Bawls (1991), Edith Wharton (2017), Westermarck, Vincent Crapanzano (1981), Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (2008), Emilio Spadola (2013). The contribution of such scholars is significant as they were the ones who initially interpreted the images they observed in different parts

¹ This most influential order is very active both nationally and internationally. Its devotees hail from all over the world, but is mostly present in the East of Morocco.

² The Tijani order stands apart from other Sufi orders and has followers in numerous regions, particularly in North and Central Africa. They regularly come together for weekly and yearly feasts, including their annual pilgrimage to Fes. The order, founded by Ahmed Tijani who was born Algeria and buried in Morocco (1737-1815), has millions of estimated followers worldwide.

³ The Chadhiliyya order was founded in Tunis by Abou Elhassan al-Chadhili, a descendant of the Idrissidis. Born in Morocco in 1197, he passed away in Egypt in 1258 and was buried there

"The Interplay of Sacred and Profane in Moroccan Cinema: Portrayals of Sainthood in 'The Unknown Saint' Film"

of Morocco into narrations and descriptions. These descriptions primarily focused on some tribal traditions that might have roots in the pre-Islamic era brought by the Phoenicians and Carthaginians and shaped by the Amazigh (Berber) indigenous culture. These scholars, among others, were trying to understand the exotic east as "a tableau of queerness" in Said's conception and blunt the threat implicit in difference to borrow. Consequently, their attempts to come to grips with religion through the folk culture is one of the reasons that has contributed to building up a fragmented and dismembered image of Sufism in Morocco.

Academic works covering sainthood in the last thirty years seem to be very much influenced by the main grounds that previous anthologists like Crapanzano have already laid out and trodden. Most of the research, in this respect, explores Sufism from its popular perspective since it comes across as very exotic and celebrates the non-western dimension of ecstasy. Such a perspective caters to an area where the sacred intermingles with the profane. Nonetheless, it is judicious to say that both Sufism and popular traditions such as the ones Ferena described in her documentary revolve around the Saint. He is the cornerstone around whom all those practices revolve. Such practices undermine the agency of reasoning. These practices are widespread among the uneducated and often misleadingly evoke the intercession of saints with God's will. Therefore, popular Islam or rather the traditions of Moroccans, as a source of inspiration, lend themselves to readings, generalized assumptions about Sufism and Islam using a bottom-up process.

While Moroccan cinema has notably lacked productions addressing themes of sainthood or Sufism, international cinema has extensively explored this aspect. Scholarly literature at the nexus of Sufism and cinema offers invaluable insights into the portrayal of mystical themes in film narratives. For example, Goran Larsson's "Mysticism and the Muslim Tradition in Contemporary Indian Cinema" (2011) examines Indian cinema's treatment of Sufism, highlighting its cultural importance. In "Mystics in the Movies: Sufism in Global Cinema" (2021), Emily Jane O'Dell explores how Sufism offers filmmakers a poetic framework to explore ontological and existential questions. Federico Zanettin's article, "The Hidden Meaning of a Movie: Sufism in the Film 'The Last Temptation of Christ'" (1988), delves into Sufi themes in Martin Scorsese's work. Collectively, these works deepen our understanding of how mystical themes intersect with cinematic storytelling on a global scale, illuminating how cinema engages with Sufism, its symbolism, and its cultural significance on the silver screen.

In exploring the spiritual dimensions of cinema, it's crucial to analyze the film "Life of Pi" (2012) which delves into various themes, such as spirituality and the quest for existential meaning, which intersect with Sufism in meaningful ways. Sufism, being a mystical facet of Islam, underscores personal spiritual evolution, introspection, and the pursuit of divine love and unity. In a similar vein, "Life of Pi" chronicles the journey of its protagonist, Pi, navigating through diverse experiences, including surviving a shipwreck and being stranded on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. A significant parallel between the film and Sufism lies in the concept of inner transformation and self-discovery. Throughout his harrowing ordeal, Pi undergoes profound personal growth, confronting his deepest fears, doubts, and desires. This transformative journey resonates with the Sufi path, which emphasizes inner purification and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment.

There are a few notable cases that have explored the Moroccan context, such as Warnock Warnock's documentary produced in 1975. This documentary sheds light on the underground spirituality in Marrakech, with a specific focus on the role of saints and holy men in their connection with the divine. Through the lens of a young woman's experiences, the documentary delves into the personal dimensions of Islam for women in Morocco, capturing three key events: the annual ritual festival in Marrakech, where contact with a spirit is renewed; the pilgrimage to the shrine of a powerful saint in the High Atlas Mountains; and the veneration of a new saint's shrine in a small town in the same region. This work resonates with the film under study, as both explore the themes of saints and shrines albeit from different perspectives.

The documentary also highlights certain rituals that are still widely practiced, particularly in the *zawayas* where renowned saints are buried. It is worth noting the paradoxical title of the program, which juxtaposes Islam and saints as if these practices represented an inherent aspect of Islam. Some scholars argue that these practices are un-Islamic and consider Moroccan Sufism to be associated with them. There is a delicate distinction between the ultimate state sought by Sufis and the physiological/psychological experiences people undergo while participating in performances of *Gnaoua*⁴ or *Aissaoua*⁵, which can induce trances and leave lasting impressions. This contrast represents one of the dichotomies between the popular approach to sainthood and the Sufi approach to it. Apparently, this interrelated aspect that marks the mystical experience reiterates the duality that characterizes research in Sufism and religion. The boundaries become blurry once anthropologists dig into various aspects of Moroccan tradition and strive to

⁴ It is genre of Moroccan music which was introduced to Morocco through slavery during Seventeen Century. It was also part of the music repertoire for most north African and West African countries and they it is referred to using different names in such countries.

⁵ Aissaoua music originated from the city of Meknes, and its name is derived from the founder of the Sufi order Ben Aissa. The full name of the founder of the order is Sheikh El Kamel Elhadi Ben Aissa (1465–1526).

"The Interplay of Sacred and Profane in Moroccan Cinema: Portrayals of Sainthood in 'The Unknown Saint' Film"

understand Islam and Sufism from such angles. Therefore, it is essential to set the scene for the reader while embarking on such a subject and forewarn the audience in a case like Warnock s.

5. METHODOLOGY

In the context of qualitative research methodology, the researcher has chosen to employ a case study approach to investigate the phenomenon under study. This entails a focused examination of a single case, without the need for comparison, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the complexities inherent within the chosen film. As articulated by John Creswell, "The researcher might focus on a few key issues (or analysis of themes, or case themes), not for generalizing beyond the case but for understanding the complexity of the case" (Creswell, p. 320). Given the limited scope of research in the area and the scarcity of film productions addressing themes of sainthood and mysticism, there is a lack of background information to extrapolate findings beyond the context of the film under analysis. Thus, the case study approach offers a suitable methodology for probing the nuances and subtleties present within the chosen film, facilitating a rich and nuanced exploration of the research questions at hand.

The research will conduct a thematic analysis of the film "The Unknown Saint," a Moroccan production from 2019 available on Netflix. Thematic analysis is selected as the methodological approach due to its suitability in addressing the research questions. Thematic analysis, a prevalent method in qualitative research, involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Kiger). It serves as a robust strategy for characterizing data, encompassing interpretation, code selection, and theme construction. Notably, thematic analysis is characterized by its flexibility, allowing it to be applied across various epistemological or theoretical frameworks and adapted to diverse research questions, designs, and sample sizes (Shukla). This approach will enable a comprehensive exploration of the film's themes and narratives, facilitating a nuanced understanding of its content and underlying messages.

6. FINDINGS

Table 1: Thematic analysis of content related to "the Unknown Saint Film"

Content	Category	Theme
The protagonist stealing money and hiding by burring it in what becomes a holy site.	Immoral conduct	Profanity
Most scenes take place in a remote and arid area	Saintly choice	Spiritually
Women of the village go the dispensary and get the same medication	Lack of education and awareness	Placebo effects
Villagers visiting the shrine to toss coins into the basin while making wishes.	Addressing their wishes to a saint	Heresy
The protagonist waits for the receptionist to hand him the key, but the receptionist is deeply engrossed in meditation on the Quran.	Devotion to religion	Spiritual drive
Only three individuals attend the prayer for rain, despite a significant number of people visiting the shrine.	Cultural shifts into saint veneration	Profanity
The villagers gather around the shrine, chanting together as they beseech the saint to intercede with God for spiritual blessings.	Faith in saint	Hersey
As one villager mourns the loss of his father, the protagonist arrives and attempts to rob the shrine to claim its money. However, the money ends up in the hands of the grieving villager instead.	Reversal of expectations	True devotion yields its rewards.
The villager who lost his father constructs a shrine using the money he found, erecting it over his father's tomb. Over time, his father becomes revered as a saint, turning the shrine into a prominent attraction site.	Who is endowed to become a saint	Profanity
The doctor and the nurse of the village drinks alcohol while working	Lack of a moral code	Profanity
The caretaker of the shrine receives preferential treatment at the barber shop as a mark of honor and respect	Roles reversal	Profanity
The thief is pretends to be as a researcher and his reputation was built on such fact	Roles reversal	Profanity

7. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed several themes regarding the portrayal of sainthood in the film "The Unknown Saint." The first theme, termed "profanity," encompasses instances where events or depictions in the film deviate from the moral code or the pure mission of saints. The second theme, titled "spirituality," highlights moments in the film where characters engage in their spirituality with sincerity and innocence, portraying a sense of positivity. The third theme, labeled "heresy," underscores a clear message in the film about the deviation of individuals from religious teachings towards social and inherited rituals, often driven by motives such as ignorance and illiteracy.

7.1. Profanity Theme

In the context of sainthood, the profane arises when the concept of sanctity, traditionally associated with spirituality and divine connection, is distorted by cultural traditions that portray saints as a curer and problem solvers. This leads to the proliferation of undesirable customs and practices surrounding saintly figures. "The Unknown Saint" challenges these taboos by depicting instances where sainthood is reduced to a mere myth constructed and believed by the people. The film presents the idea of a shrine being hastily built, followed by the rapid acquisition of a reputation among villagers who seek blessings there. Additionally, the revelation that the shrine was built at the same place where the stolen money by the protagonist was buried contradicts any legitimacy for the person buried there to be considered a saint. This juxtaposition between the sacred and the profane highlights the film's critique of the cultural perceptions surrounding sainthood.

7.2. The theme of heresy

The theme of heresy is intricately woven with profanity throughout several scenes in the film, with certain instances standing out more prominently. For instance, villagers visiting the shrine to toss coins into the basin while making wishes directly address these wishes to the saint, contradicting Islamic teachings that prayers should be directed solely to God. Another clear depiction of heresy arises when villagers gather around the shrine, chanting together as they beseech the saint to intercede with God for spiritual blessings. This deviation from religious norms is compounded by the prevalence of illiteracy among the villagers, which leads to intentional digression into heresy. Additionally, the film explores the placebo effect as a theme, highlighting illiteracy as a primary contributor to such deviations by illustrating how individuals naively attribute healing properties to a particular medicine regardless of its efficacy. These scenes underscore the complex interplay between religious belief, cultural practices, and societal norms within the context of sainthood depicted in the film.

7.3. The theme of spirituality

The film features scenes that prompt viewers to engage in reflection and contemplation. Set in a quaint, remote village with minimal amenities and devoid of modern technology, the aesthetic choice of this setting also alludes to the typical locations where saints are revered in Morocco. Many saints' shrines are situated in such remote villages or atop hills, exemplified by the renowned saint Moulay Abdeslam Ben Mchich, whose shrine is located far from urban centers. The film portrays a character devoted to their faith, contrasting with the receptionist at a small hotel who appears indifferent to guests while engrossed in reading the Quran, causing them to wait. Moments of sincerity and hope emerge, such as when three individuals earnestly beseech God for rain. These scenes not only contribute to the film's narrative but also offer insights into the cultural and religious contexts surrounding the spiritual dimension of sainthood in Morocco.

The analysis of the film has revealed three main themes, each accompanied by several sub-themes. Among these, two notable sub-themes are the "placebo effect" and "true devotion yields its rewards." The latter is exemplified by a scene where a villager mourns the loss of his father, only for the protagonist to attempt to rob the shrine in search of money. However, the money ends up in the hands of the grieving villager instead, rendering the protagonist's efforts futile. This incident challenges the traditional notion of sainthood, as the villager, motivated by love and devotion for his father, uses the stolen money to build a shrine over his father's tomb. This act raises questions about the authenticity of sanctity, as the father did not perform any saintly miracles or possess any remarkable traits but is simply revered by his son. This critical statement, central to the film's conclusion, underscores how cinema is utilized to challenge conventional ideas of sanctity and explore the complexities of devotion and belief.

8. CONCLUSION

The main findings of the study highlight that cinema has catalyzed a critical analysis of the perception of sainthood in Morocco. Through films like "The Unknown Saint," a new era of questioning and reevaluation has emerged, challenging previously unquestioned beliefs. The film subtly refutes the notion that anyone can become a saint by presenting an example of a seemingly ordinary individual who is revered as a saint solely because his son decided to build a shrine over his tomb. This concept not only calls into question the authenticity of the saint depicted in the film but also prompts a reconsideration of how society interacts with and venerates saints. By shedding light on these complexities, cinema serves as a powerful medium for provoking thought and encouraging discourse on the nature of sanctity and belief.

"The Interplay of Sacred and Profane in Moroccan Cinema: Portrayals of Sainthood in 'The Unknown Saint' Film"

The thematic analysis uncovered additional themes within the main discussion, notably education and health. The film presents a bleak portrayal of healthcare facilities, where medical staff lack essential tools and appear unmotivated to provide adequate care to the villagers. The depiction of the doctor and nurse suggests systemic failures within the healthcare system. Additionally, the lack of education emerges as a significant issue, as many individuals involved in either conducting sermons at the shrine or seeking medical assistance demonstrate a lack of formal education. This educational deficit leaves them vulnerable to manipulation by myths and oral traditions, exacerbating existing challenges within the community.

"The Unknown Saint" presents a rich tapestry of Moroccan society, delving into the layers of faith, tradition, and societal dynamics that shape the country's cultural landscape. The film's narrative intricately weaves together themes of spirituality, belief, and the human condition, offering viewers a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in Moroccan identity. Through its thematic depth and thought-provoking storytelling, the film transcends mere entertainment, inviting audiences to critically examine prevailing norms and question entrenched perceptions. Ultimately, "The Unknown Saint" serves as more than a cinematic experience—it serves as a catalyst for introspection and dialogue about the multifaceted nature of Moroccan identity and culture. By engaging with the film's themes and narratives, viewers are invited to delve deeper into the complexities of faith, tradition, and societal dynamics, fostering a richer understanding of the intricacies that shape Moroccan society.

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