



Interview with Farida Benlyazid

Maria-Àngels Roque. Editor-in-Chief of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*

Maria-Àngels Roque: How do you imagine the Mediterranean, Farida? When you talk about your origins, you talk about a Tangier quite different from today's city. What was such a Mediterranean city as Tangier like when you were a child and you lived there with your family?

Farida Benlyazid: Tangier was a beautiful city, like a dream. It was a city of international representation. There was competition among the countries' representatives, and it had great prestige. There were festivals everywhere, in the streets. For me it was normal, but now I realise that it was very crazy and very beautiful, like a dream.

M.A.R.: You speak of representations of the different embassies, of the different colonial powers. Did locals also participate in the festivals?

F.B.: It was not a very big city, it had around 150,000 inhabitants. Locals had their religious festivals, for instance Sidi Bouarrakia, the city's patron saint. I don't remember this festival because I was very young at the time, but my mother used to tell me that they killed a yearling, stands were set up and all the countries were represented in the Moors festival. There were also Muslim festivals, which were held at home, and the international community festivals, with very good street performances.

For instance, people danced flamenco in Plaza de España. I remember that my mother bought me a gypsy dress with castanets. On Christmas Eve Spanish people would go on the street playing *zambombas*. So locals also participated in international festivals.

M.A.R.: I don't think that this cosmopolitan side of Tangier and also Alexandria, another part of the Mediterranean, exists now. But this cosmopolitanism also involved colonialism. Do people feel better now because they are in a national state, or did colonialism not affect them as much as it seems?

F.B.: Well, Tangier is a particular case. Emilio Sanz de Soto, a Tangier-born friend of Ángel Vásquez, Jane Bowles or Carlos Saura and who passed away recently, told me that they used to sit in the café to smoke cigars wearing panama hats and watched the bombs fall in Spain during the Civil War. It was like living in a bubble. All the locals who lived through that time miss it, regardless of their nationality. People did not pay taxes. It is worth recalling that the Moroccan politicians of the resistance took refuge there. My grandfather had a block of flats and one of them was rented by Belafrej and his family, one of the most important members of the Istiqlal Party, who for many years was prime minister under Hassan II. That was also the time of Allal Alfasi, leader of Istiqlal,



and Al Wazani, leader of the Democratic Party of the time. I married El Menebhi's grandson, whose grandfather was a minister under Mulai Abd al-Aziz, and at that time he supported the colonisation by the British and Germans. When the French asserted their authority, they had to take refuge. They travelled from Marrakech to Tangier and had a house built here where nationalist meetings were held. He used to tell me that on one occasion they came to arrest them but, given that they were protected by England, they were immediately released. It was a very special life, the leaders of the resistance and the colonialists protected each other. The weapons for the resistance arrived in the free port of Tangier and passed through the area of the Spanish protectorate to be used against the French protectorate without control.

M.A.R.: I've recently noticed that there are more women in Tangier wearing the hijab than thirty years ago. You once told me about the notable presence of the rural people in urban areas. Don't you think that in recent years there has been greater religious fundamentalism?

F.B.: Yes, Tangier is the first city where fundamentalism began, spread by Tangier workers who immigrated to Belgium thirty or forty years ago and returned on holiday. In Belgium, Pakistanis paid by Wahabbis contacted them. Everything began there. We began seeing strangers who told locals "what you do is not Islam." Later, Wahabbi networks were created throughout the city and the country.

M.A.R.: Is the Rif area a more fundamentalist fiefdom than the rest of Morocco?

F.B.: No, the problem exists throughout Morocco. I will use an example. I have just finished a series of documentaries on Amazigh music throughout the country with the producer Dounia Benjelloun. We have been working

in regions such as the Atlas, Sousse... And, well, one of the singers, who is also a deputy, Fatema Tabâmrant, told me that in some villages people don't dance anymore. Many cultural traditions that have survived for centuries are disappearing. In Kelâat Mgouna we were also told that Moroccans working in Holland gave people money not to sing or dance. The Wahabbi network is very wide, it even reaches Europe.

M.A.R.: In Europe people believe that Muslims have imposed fundamentalism, but what you told me is very interesting. Morocco is an area, like the whole Mediterranean, where there are very ancient cultures with pre-Christian and pre-Islamic elements, rituals known for millennia. You mentioned the religious festivals of Sidi Bouarrakia, the city's patron saint. Fundamentalists are against popular Islam and destroy the *zawias* with the excuse that Islam has no mediators between the believer and Allah.

F.B.: In Moroccan Islam you didn't normally see fundamentalism but now it is taking root. Muslim countries are victims of this fundamentalism and this is related with oil money.

M.A.R.: We have a great lack of knowledge of Islam and people who live in Islamic countries. In the Mediterranean area we are quite similar in our different customs, ranging from food practices to rituals.

F.B.: My grandmother, my father's mother, went to live in Melilla and met Christians she had never seen in Fez, and she told me exactly this: she realised that they were like us.

M.A.R.: You work with art and communication: why do you think this prejudice exists among peoples that are so close, linked with religion?



Farida Benlyazid and Maria-Àngels Roque (IEMed Collection).

F.B.: I really don't understand it. I grew up in a place where it was normal to respect the other. Yes, we were Muslims, we bore Islam inside us, but this didn't mean that we had to despise our Jewish neighbours, for instance, because we always had Jewish neighbours. At school we were friends, and I liked knowing what happened in the other houses, and they invited me to birthday parties, and I invited them. It was taken for granted that the others are different but it doesn't matter, you treat them the same. I imagine that if the world could live like this it would be very nice. This is what made me adapt Ángel Vázquez' *La vida perra de Juanita Narboni* for the cinema.

In the end, we are all different, including within Islam and within each family. This is why I believe that ignorance, not knowing the

others, is one of the most important factors in despising them. My other grandmother travelled to Mecca, and passed through Greece. In the Moroccan imaginary, Greeks are polytheists. Being polytheist was the worst because Christians or Jews are monotheist. And my grandmother used to tell me with surprise: "We've been to Greece and have seen that boys are very handsome, they go to school like everybody else..." When along with ignorance there is fear of the others, of the unknown, and also manipulation and propaganda against them, then it is terrible.

M.A.R.: The stranger is always different. This vision has had a great influence on immigration. Despite the new technologies and globalisation, everything goes on the same.

I think that we usually know other realities through the media and we believe that this has nothing to do with our life. Don't you agree?

F.B.: I think so. Human beings are very primitive. Despite so much technology, we have an instinctive fear of the unknown that does not evolve. There has always been intelligent and cultivated people and very closed people. Moreover, culture can withdraw very quickly. I saw a man in Iraq who sold books in the streets and said that his father used to read but that he has stopped reading. Under Saddam Hussein, in Iraq there was a very strong culture, which in a few years seems to have vanished.

M.A.R.: Like in that story by Borges, "The Intruder", in which some British migrants took a Bible to a village in Argentina but their descendants were illiterate and didn't know what it was.

F.B.: If it is not cultivated, culture gradually disappears, is erased.

M.A.R.: We empathise better when we read, or see a film, than when we listen to a speech. But to have empathy you have to be in contact, either with a person or with a work of art. Do you believe that technology, which on the one hand can help acquire greater knowledge, also helps to empathise? For example, the issue of machismo has not been definitely eradicated. Now, with mobile phones, young boys control girls much more than in the past. In this case, technology means a step back.

F.B.: Technology is a tool but it does not change minds. Terrorists use Internet for their propaganda campaigns, to reach people, and it is terrible to see how they have managed it.

M.A.R.: One of the early terrorist attacks was perpetrated in Morocco and later portrayed

in the film *Horses of God*. They were marginalised youths recruited by Salafism.

F.B.: Yes, in Casablanca. I love that film.

M.A.R.: Now it is no longer surprising that there had been terrorist acts in a Muslim country, because there have been many other attacks, like those in Syria, Iraq or Egypt, but then it was shocking for the whole world. How was it experienced in Morocco?

F.B.: With horror. We don't want to be associated with terrorism at all. The problem is that Morocco is a country that accepted high numbers of Wahabbis because Hassan II reached an agreement with the Saudis; both wanted to take power from progressives to their own benefit. At universities, in the 1980s, the great struggles were between Islamists and progressives.

M.A.R.: Where did those Islamists train?

F.B.: In Morocco. I recall that it was a time when in Tangier all those who traded in drugs were given money and told that instead of selling they should go to the mosque and pray. They even brought Wahabbi teachers who taught them the doctrine. This was forty years ago. It was even permitted to fight in Afghanistan against the Russians. Now it is the opposite, they are working to end the radical outbreaks. The Minister of Islamic Affairs, Ahmed Toufiq, is a very cultivated and open person who works with interreligious issues but, of course, the Islamists, who are many, are against him.

We should also note the work of the new thinkers of Islam who are deconstructing the dogmatism of the Wahabbis throughout the Islamic world. For instance, the work of Asma Lamrabet, whose book *Islam et femmes, les questions qui fâchent* has recently been awarded the Grand Atlas Prize, is very important.

M.A.R.: We are now going through quite a low period in the Mediterranean. In the 1990s, there was hope as many projects were considered, even the implementation of an area of cooperation and free trade. This changed with the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, in 2001. Then the wars in Iraq and Syria came along and we now see that it is the great powers that perpetuate these wars. Moreover, the Mediterranean is currently one of the largest cemeteries in the world. Many people have died trying to cross it. How can we imagine a friendlier Mediterranean?

F.B.: Perhaps when the oil runs out, to begin with, because the USA is very involved in this Mediterranean and manipulates it. Now Saudi Arabia wants to attack Iran, they have engendered hatred between Sunnis and Shiites, who have always lived together without problems.

M.A.R.: Saudi Arabia wants to become a power. And Russia has greatly benefitted from the war in Syria because it is now back on the international stage. Instead of a Mediterranean of peoples and cultures, we see a Mediterranean of states. During colonialism, when the sharing of power took place, there were many countries that gained nothing, and now there are also problems because of this. Because when a people want to become a state, it imposes what it considers its identity without taking the diversities into account. Thus, there are problems with the Kurds, the Armenians, the Catalans. Could we imagine a Mediterranean of peoples, of people, where the concept of nation was not so important? Do you believe art can help?

F.B.: My film *Frontieras*, a play of words in the title between *frontières*, in French, and *fronteras*, in Spanish, deals with the problem of the Sahara, which was divided, like all Morocco, between two powers that imposed artificial

frontiers. Sometimes, artists feel very helpless but I do believe that we must try. In the end, it's all about poetics. The communism of the Soviet Union collapsed when nobody expected it because it seemed it was for life; capitalism is falling apart, devouring itself... We artists must at least try to reach people; to say what we think is best for humanity. We don't look for power, we target humanity. Art is universal. Each work can be a window that brings us closer, that shows us that the other is like me, that we humans have very similar problems, although our cultures are different. An other is another me.

M.A.R.: You have been a pioneer of cinema, not only Moroccan but also Maghrebian. Women filmmakers, in these countries, are as important as male filmmakers. Tell me about this.

F.B.: For years I was the only woman working in cinema, but for some time we have been seeing the arrival of new young women who make very beautiful films distributed internationally. Narjis Nejjar became known for her beautiful film *Les yeux secs* ("Dry Eyes"); Yasmine Kessari has received more than forty awards for *L'enfant endormi* ("The Sleeping Boy"); Layla Marakchi caused great controversy with her film *Marock*, which annoyed Islamists; Zakia Tahiri directed *Origine contrôlée* ("Controlled Origin") along with her husband and later directed *Number One* on her own, and Fatema Zemmouri Ouazzani has directed the very remarkable film *Dans la maison de mon père* ("At My Father's Home").

All of them live abroad, and their films are co-productions with France, Belgium or Holland. Later came Layla Kilani, who received many awards for her film *Sur la planche*. We should also mention Selma Bargach and Layla Triki, who struggled to make their first feature film in Morocco. Like them, others had begun

making shorts. I will mention Dalila Ennader, Layla Ghandi and Lamia Naji. Now many are emerging.... And others are directing telefilms. The pioneer in this field is Farida Bourquia, who has worked for television since the 1970s and has made two feature films for cinema.

Returning to my work, I've see that my films surprise people every time they are premiered. It seems that I always go where I am not expected. I am also a producer, which is not at all easy because we have very tight budgets. Although I must acknowledge that we have the advantage of being free, without yielding to the demands of the market, given that it is almost non-existent.

M.A.R.: You've come to Barcelona on the occasion of the Festival of Spiritual Cinema of Catalonia, and you have presented one of your first films, *A Door to the Sky*, which is also one of the early post-colonial film productions on the situation of women and Islam. The lead character is a woman who lives in Paris and returns to her hometown, Fez, to attend her father's funeral. The woman then recovers her

spirituality based on her Moroccan roots, which include a Sufi vision. In her final years, Fatema Mernissi, one of the major figures in current Maghrebian culture, worked on recovering texts by Sufi mystics. Is this work related to a particular stage of your life?

F.B.: I think so. Fatema Mernissi and I exchanged many ideas on feminism, youth culture or Sufism, which is the spirituality in Islam. Religions meet in spirituality, there is one God for all. At the end of *A Door to the Sky* I tried to talk about the Mount of Olives and the yin yang. I recently liked the film *En quête de sens*, by Marc de la Ménardière and Nathanaël Coste, which explores the different branches of spirituality in the world and concludes with unity. We all belong to the same creation, the One.

And I have just written a script about the life of Fatema Mernissi and her extraordinary work. It will be directed by M.A. Tazi, Fatema's cousin, with whom I have worked writing the scripts for his films *A la recherche du mari de ma femme* and *Badis*.