

Farouk El Maarouf

Street Art, Festivity, and the Politics of Possession in the Moroccan Urban Space

MECAM Papers | Number 01 | June 15, 2022 | <https://doi.org/10.25673/86247> | ISSN: 2751-6474

Recently, festivals have come to acquire unprecedented importance in Morocco. Today, one can enjoy an entire year full of the country's different festivities, among them Mawazine, the Gnaoua Festival, the Almond Blossom Festival, the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music, and the Imilchil Marriage Festival.

- Structurally, Moroccan festivals have undergone a crucial change during the last 20 years. They are no longer discrete and isolated cultural events. They have shifted from being typically local and rural celebrations (*moussems*) to events global in nature. Ideologically, they are rationally produced and professionally managed. Socially, they are arbitrated through a volatile, unsteady, and yet innovative context of sociopolitical conflict.
- While analysing the Jidar Street Art Festival more specifically, the article discusses the politics of possession regarding the city walls in Morocco's capital, as taking place through small-scale, personal endeavours or with large-scale visibility under state patronage.
- As such, the Jidar Street Art Festival has a great impact on the cultural and local understanding of the urban city. The murals become the urban image, functioning along the lines of city gentrification, and a representation of the world which systematically ignores the truth on the ground lying beyond the colourful walls higher up.

CONTEXT

Looking at contemporary festivals in Morocco points to the lurking hierarchies, hegemonies, and modes of suppression which can help to unravel the urban conflicts and resulting resistance based on the execution of cultural practices shaped by powerful actors like the state.

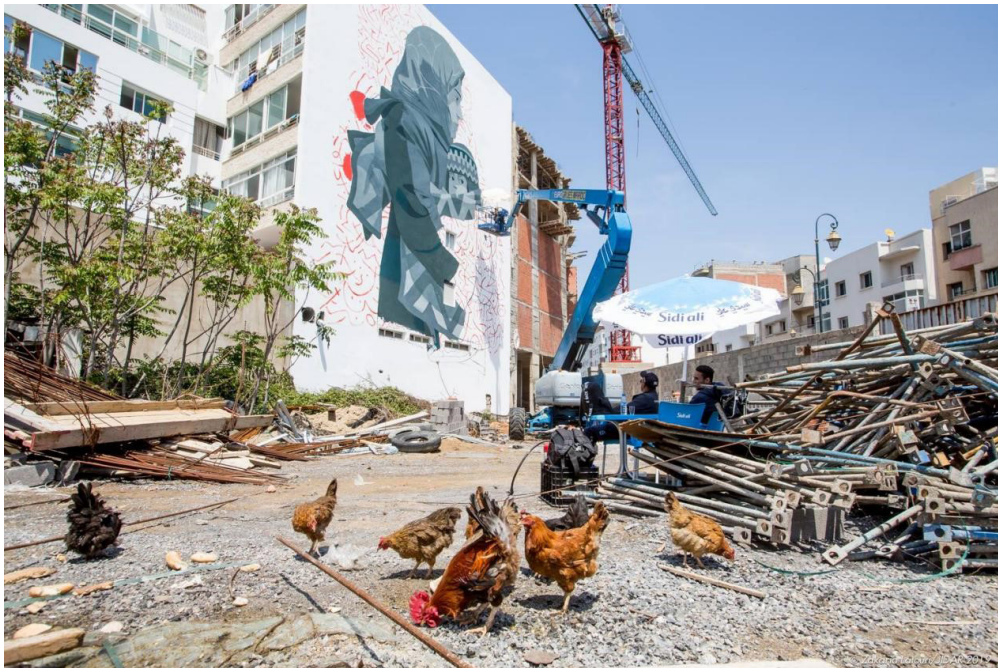


THE JIDAR STREET ART FESTIVAL IN RABAT STOLID

In the spring of each year, around 12 visual artists are invited to Rabat, the capital of Morocco, to contribute to a common theme by presenting their works to the city's residents. The Jidar Street Art Festival (JSAF) is an artistic occasion on which the city of Rabat gets to be embellished with 12 colourful murals. It is an opportunity for artists to display their talent on a large scale, and for the citizens of the city to enjoy new art pieces in their favourite spots around town. The festival is promoted as an outstanding opportunity for national and international visual street artists to work on a common theme and exchange their personal stories and experiences (El Maarouf and El Maarouf 2020: 25–26). During the festival, walls are assigned to each artist who must draw a croquis of the mural they intend to work on and present it to the organisers of the event. After checking if the croquis is appropriate (socially and culturally), the artist then starts to work on the mural using tools and equipment provided by the festival team.

The extent to which local festive events taking place in the urban space of Morocco – far from being finished products, and although officially maintained to be purely cultural in nature – can be continuously re-evaluated in light of their social and political underpinnings. Knowing that change – cultural and urban – in cities is inevitable, non-random, and too subtle to notice, the recent meanings ascribed to the JSAF in Rabat in the face of events like popular uprising, social turmoil, and conflicts over festivity are revealing – as, for example, with protests against festivals such as Mawazine in 2011 (Alami 2011). Is it just walls that the festival wants to cover, or are there other things like poverty, corruption, social injustice, and urban decay which will be painted over too? Of equal importance are the regimes of value through which the entities at play (the wall, the official festival artist, hit-and-run graffitists) keep moving. Key, then, are the lurking contemporary hierarchies, hegemonies, and modes of suppression, as well as the urban conflicts and resulting resistance that the cultural practices used during the JSAF help to lay bare.

Image 1. A Mural in the Making



Source: JIDAR (2019)

MOROCCO BETWEEN CULTURAL FESTIVITY AND URBAN CHANGE

The importance of two underlying historical conditions must be underscored to ensure full comprehension of what follows. First, the urban space in Morocco has for decades been part of the “material goods” owned, controlled, and exploited by the makhzan – the Moroccan governing institutions centred around the monarch. Second, urban festivities, as many believe, have given a great portion of the urban space – even if only symbolically – back to the people.

Boum (2012) traces the “festivalisation” of arts and culture in Morocco to the post-independence period, when King Mohammed V launched – three years after the end of French colonial rule – the National Festival of Popular Arts in 1960, which was first staged in Rabat before then being transferred to Marrakech. Later, Morocco celebrated a number of festivities in the form of moussems, which have since been slowly eclipsed by modern festivities. This transformation started to take place in the late 1980s, with the pushing of the rural into the urban in the form of internal migration (Boum 2012). Although “many of the celebrations started out as moussems” (Boum 2012: 23), festivals and moussems are different kinds of events – with their distinct spatial, organisational, and conceptual underpinnings. Therefore, the shift from traditional moussems towards modern festivities should not be misinterpreted as a simple evolution of one into the other.

Moussems, though merry and joyful, differ greatly from festivals. Moussems are usually marked by their religious and cultural aspects, with friends and family members coming together to celebrate their cultural identity. They usually honour saints by visiting their qubba (shrine), bringing gifts and saying prayers, seeking good health, or expressing their wish to marry, among other life aspirations. As such, moussems are religious holidays marked by spirituality, local music, and dance. Festivals, on the other hand, are usually larger in scale (as they cater for international patrons as well) and do not necessarily centre around a context-specific spiritual or religious theme. Such events can be musical like the Gnaoua Festival in Essaouira, comedy-related like Marrakech du Rire, or for cinema lovers like the Marrakech International Film Festival.

State-sponsored activities hint at the reorientation of public interest and local efforts towards the production of more urban festivals, but not at the expense of moussems – even as the latter have clearly faded. Modern festivals and their associated urban contests provide opportunities to initiate purely urban forms of artistic practice spearheaded by trends like hip-hop and rap, which birthed flourishing forms of street art – including graffiti. Against this backdrop, ideas formulated by Nass al-Ghiwane – a group of musicians – have become very prominent in Morocco. In the 1980s, they articulated a broad-based philosophy of urban change which was visually cosmopolitan, adding to the role of art as a politicised medium of expression, while keeping up with traditional Moroccan artistic and linguistic forms. In fact, Nass al-Ghiwane played a leading role in diffusing the spirit of revolt in times of obdurate tyranny through songs like *Lbtana* (Nass al-Ghiwane 2008). Hence, they gave voice to Moroccans who were dissatisfied with the social inequities and political oppression of that time and hoping for a better future.

THE CONTEMPORARY FUNCTIONS OF CULTURAL FESTIVITIES IN MOROCCO

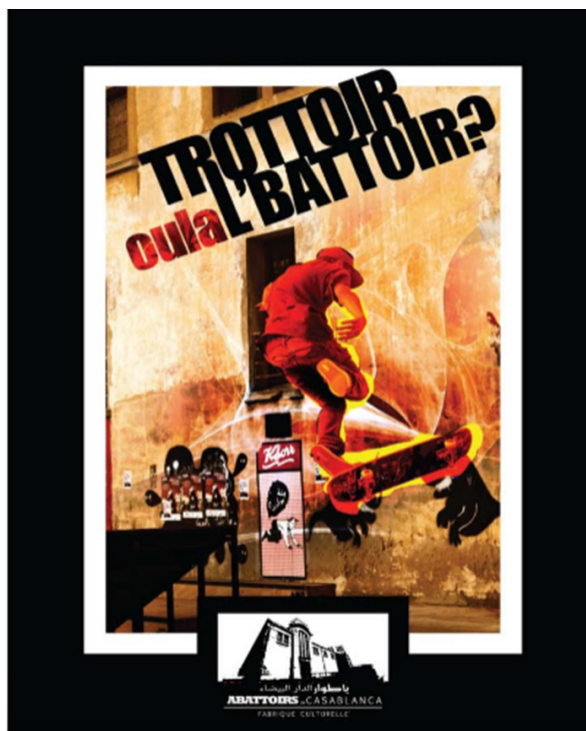
The renewed importance with which Moroccan festivities can be studied today is tied to their situation amid local and global, social and political intersections. Overall, contemporary festivals can be explained in relation to their historical genesis, typology, and territoriality. On the historical front, modern festivals borrow from moussems and fantasias, which are small-scale, low-budget rural events. These contain many forms of



celebration and oral music traditions, performed and consumed by attendees in the *halqas* (gatherings), fairs, music shows, and musical games therein exhibited. By comparison, festivals are diverse, and that diversity is accentuated by territorial principles; that is, every territory (city or town) holds festivals which resonate with the sociocultural codes it interpellates. For example, Fez, otherwise known as the cultural capital of Morocco, hosts the Festival of World Sacred Music (FWSM), while Casablanca, the country's economic capital, hosts L'Boulevard Festival, among others. While a music festival like the FWSM hones in on the themes of sacredness, tolerance, and pastness to pledge its significance as a spiritual event, promoting the city of Fez as a "lieu de memoire" (Belghazi 2006: 231); the JSAF instead gives impetus to the ongoing endeavour to turn Rabat into a "city of lights"¹ with the deep-seated awareness of the Moroccan capital's dark spots and decaying peripheries.

Moreover, the JSAF, as with all festivals taking place in the capital (e.g. Mawazine), has a semi-elitist philosophy, despite its official resolve to render art accessible to all levels of society. In that sense, the JSAF can be juxtaposed with purely underground subcultural festivals created by EAC-L'Boulevard – an organisation founded in 1999 by Mohamed Merhari and Hicham Bahou. The idea behind the JSAF goes back to the L'Boulevard, which is held in the ancient abattoir of Casablanca. Parallel to this, a small artistic and social market – the souk – takes place, constituting an interesting space of exchange for different commodities (T-shirts, artworks, paintings, canvas/panel graffiti walls). Additionally, L'Boulevard is not only a site of pilgrimage for subcultural styles and trendy looks: it also constitutes a spectacular underground exhibition of punk, goth, glam, hip-hop, Afro-American, and other urban styles. The festival is attended by artists who are not allowed to perform on the street: circus performers, acrobats, cross-dressers, and graffitiists.

Image 2. "Sidewalk or Abattoir?"



Source: L'Kounach del L'Boulevard (2010: 15).

¹ "Rabat City of Light, Moroccan Capital of Culture" is an ambitious project which was initiated under the supervision of King Mohamed VI in 2014. Noteworthy is the fact that the word "light" is better thought to mirror knowledge, influence, art, culture, and discovery than standing for mere brilliant illumination.

In addition to the main music events and contests, L'Boulevard also organises art workshops and exhibitions mostly dealing with the concepts of urbanism, music, fashion, and other topics emanating from neoliberal society and thinking by giving funds to amateurs to purchase paint and art equipment in order to let them experiment within the scattered walls of the former abattoir. L'Kounach (see Image 2 above) is a magazine published by the festival organisers in French, featuring these artists' works in editorials urban in style. Later, Merhari moved the small-scale urban project away from the L'Boulevard Festival to three different cities: Casablanca (2013), Rabat (2015), and Marrakech (2016).

To be sure, the urban, subcultural dimension of L'Boulevard, though missing in Mawazine, is highly present in the JSAF. However, the underlying critique persists: the government-sponsored festivals of Rabat lean more towards world superstars and Western artists. This idea of extravagance vis-à-vis the JSAF can be seen in the attempt to organise a yearly festival which slowly transforms the city into an open-air gallery. Such festivities are criticised for transmitting the image of cultural grandeur through their meta-aura. Mawazine, for instance, would be lambasted before and especially during the Middle East and North Africa social uprisings of 2011 for squandering public money, standing as a sign of corruption and social injustice. Protesters argued that the money spent on superstars might better go to public investments that Moroccans themselves could benefit from.

The JSAF can legitimately be criticised for its underlying support of Rabat's gentrification, whereby ordinary dwellers of the Moroccan capital cannot afford to pay escalating rent prices or enjoy adequate living standards in a city whose current cultural and artistic lifestyle is more exclusive than inclusive when it comes to lower-class citizens. This is further aggravated by the influx of huge infrastructural projects like the installation of tram rails in different parts of the city, the renovation of roads, the building of bridges, world-class theatres, and skyscrapers. These developments go hand in hand with the explicit official pronouncements by the government that the capital is systematically geared towards becoming, as noted, a city of lights.

On the other hand, these festivals continue to shed light on the striking paradoxes of urbanity in a postcolonial city, attesting to and laying bare the complexities and contradictions of "spectacularisation" in Morocco. This is evident in the various themes they address: urbanism, locality, cosmopolitanism, minorities, cultural circulation, underground struggles, and class politics. Although the rites of "celebration" in Morocco are similar, more broadly speaking, to other festivities seen on the African continent, the breadth of festivalisation in Morocco remains second to none in consequence.

AESTHETIC APPRECIATION AND POWER RELATIONS

The JSAF has substantial intra-artistic aims and goals. During its 2018 edition, for example, three of the festival's street-artist guests met with students from the National School of Architecture for three days to conceptually establish a link between architecture and the urban arts. Eventually, eight budding artists and students in the Visual Arts scene were selected to give an introduction to Muralism – an artistic movement which began in Mexico in the 1920s as an attempt to bring the country together after the Revolution of the preceding decade – based on the creation of a collective wall painting under the leadership of the Mexican artist Dherzu Uzala.

According to Merhari, the reason behind the JSAF's organisation is to prove that art is not meant solely for the elites but rather represents a domain intended to appeal to and reflect the senses and/or the mindsets of all citizens. Hence art, Merhari argues, should not be exclusive to museums. Moroccan citizens therefore have the right to enjoy aesthetics of art regardless of whether they have the financial means to go to art galleries or not. Based on this reading, Merhari distinguishes between elitist and accessible art. For him, the state intervenes to provide the people with artistic content they would otherwise

find unobtainable or inaccessible.

This reading of Moroccan festivals cannot sympathise with any kind of power absolutism assuming social power operating according to an “either/or” logic. The proportionality of power in the urban space, however, is contingent on the amount of consciousness with which space and temporality are used. Formalistic urban conduct is usually associated with degrees of “deficiency,” not in the sense of emptiness or purposelessness, but rather in the sense that those who occupy the urban space exist outside of any urgent need to be conscious about importing conflict to it. The urban space is a bedrock for multiple activities, accommodative as it were of hybrid action and interaction between power and counter-power, between state patronage, politics, and transformative artistic desires.

For instance, the traces cutting through the urban space as a field of systematic regulation, surveillance, and control are never fully erased even when they are overwritten by other new texts in the context of festivity (carnival), of reunion (outdoor political speeches), or of resistance (demonstrations). These traces are gateways to inedible easily resurrected forms of urban practice, which many times rise in chorus to produce ambivalent urban meanings. Therefore, performative acts take place in multimodal, multifunctional, and heterogeneous spaces, where even the clarity of fresh urban scriptures is obscured by older and newer ones. Walls that once accommodated traces of graffiti or signs of different mural styles have been remastered through new layers of state-owned paint and art. Sometimes, those very walls are repainted after some time in white, serving thus as virgin slots for new graffities. This process of writing and overwriting is an example of the palimpsest where a manuscript (in this case, wall) is washed away (painted over) to allow for new texts to fit and/or be used for other purposes.

THE POLITICS OF POSSESSION

The JSAF performs at the fringes of a politics of possession which street and graffiti artists have always enjoyed. Putting paint on a wall which belongs to someone else is an act of acquisition regularly practised by them. The signature of the artist, though usually an act of vandalism, gives a sense of legitimacy – forcefully taken when no one was paying attention. Graffitiists perform a hit-and-run action, remaining conscious of watchful eyes and of the police.

However, in the context of the JSAF, the invited artists are given the opportunity to continue their tradition of wall possessing under the supervision of the state. Of course, this means that the artist must curb any ideological texts (art forms) which go against the inclinations of his/her employer. The possession of the city walls through paint, thanks to the JSAF, becomes legal and under the patronage of a state giving these artists a degree of visibility. Hence, “[t]he race towards success, the need to be wanted, and the need to be recruited by wanting festivities underscores the artist’s feeling that Power’s possession of the city cannot happen without him” (El Maarouf and El Maarouf 2020: 34).

Interestingly enough, painting the wall of a private property, for example, becomes as a result a struggle over possession between the state-owned festival, the artist, and the proprietor(s) of the site itself. The artists want to own the city, or at least parts of it, through traces of paint while the “possessive nature of paint mirrors a subtle and visible dynamics of acquisition that marks the general air of the city” (El Maarouf and El Maarouf 2020: 33). The abrupt transformation of the city image through large-scale international festivals, grand projects, and prominent attractions connotes endeavour towards the construction of cultural and artistic identity, over which there already exists fierce conflict.

On the official front, the government has been warding off plans to cancel its most prestigious icon (Mawazine) by backing it up with other festivals (e.g. Festival Jazz au Chellah or the JSAF). The Moroccan government encouraged by its policies the eventual outburst of the so-called Nayda (Awakening) in 2003, which has been said to be close to

the countercultural Spanish, La Movida Madrileña of the 1980s. Since then, all sorts of urban underground styles – from punk to graffiti – have become more pronounced. Local authorities and the Ministry of Culture gave these initiatives their blessing; if nothing else, they marked a transition away from the country’s history of violence and repression. The new urban culture, also called la nouvelle scène (new scene), now hopes to fine-tune urban tension and to usher urbanites into an era of celebration of a more relaxed being-in-the-world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alami, A. (2011), *Morocco’s Mawazine Festival Stirs Controversy*, <https://www.morocco-worldnews.com/2011/06/705/moroccos-mawazine-festival-stirs-controversy/?print=pdf> (17 March 2022).
- Belghazi, T. (2006), Festivalization of Urban Space in Morocco, in: *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 15, 1, 97–107.
- Boum, A. (2012), Youth, Political Activism and the Festivalization of Hip-hop Music in Morocco, in: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Ziesenwine (eds.), *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics, and Society under Mohammed VI*, London: Routledge.
- Boum, A. (2012), Festivalizing Dissent in Morocco, in: *Middle East Report*, 263 (Summer), 22–25.
- El Maarouf, F., and M. D. El Maarouf (2020), City as Canvas: Street Art (ists), Walls and the City between State Patronage and Artistic Transformation, in: *Matatu*, 51, 1, 23–42.
- Nass al- Ghiwane (2008), *Nass al- Ghiwane – LBTANA*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xndJIgmQ5lY> (17 March 2022).
- JIDAR - Rabat Street Art Festival (2019), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/jidar.toilesderue/photos/2351531055130140> (17 March 2022).
- L’Kounach del L’Boulevard (2010), *Casablanca/Morocco*, https://issuu.com/silentscope/docs/l_kounache_2010_v2 (17 March 2022).
- Turner, V. (1975), *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Farouk El Maarouf is a PhD candidate at the International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture, Faculty of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, at Justus Liebig University Giessen, and Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco. El Maarouf graduated from the Center of Moroccan Cultural Studies at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez. In 2021, he was awarded a fellowship at MECAM, the Merian Center for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb. El Maarouf's research engages with topics like alternative economies, risk society, local art markets and treasure hunting in Morocco, gender politics, street art, Maghrebian literature, diaspora studies, and youth and activism. Besides his academic interests, El Maarouf is a portrait artist and a creative writer.

E-Mail: frelmaarouf@gmail.com

IMPRINT

The MECAM Papers are an Open Access publication and can be read on the Internet and downloaded free of charge at: <https://mecam.tn/mecam-papers/>. MECAM Papers are long-term archived by MENA-LIB at: <https://www.menalib.de/en/vifa/menadoc>. According to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/legalcode>), this publication may be freely reproduced and shared for non-commercial purposes only. The conditions include the accurate indication of the initial publication as a MECAM Paper and no changes in or abbreviation of texts.

MECAM Papers are published by MECAM, which is the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb – a research centre for interdisciplinary research and academic exchange based in Tunis, Tunisia. Under its guiding theme "Imagining Futures – Dealing with Disparity," MECAM promotes the internationalisation of research in the Humanities and Social Sciences across the Mediterranean. MECAM is a joint initiative of seven German and Tunisian universities as well as research institutions, and is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

MECAM Papers are edited and published by MECAM. The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Centre itself. Authors alone are responsible for the content of their articles. MECAM and the authors cannot be held liable for any errors and omissions, or for any consequences arising from the use of the information provided.

Editor: Dr. Thomas Richter

Editorial Department: Dr. James Powell, Christine Berg

Merian Centre for Advanced Study in the Maghreb (MECAM)

GIGA | Neuer Jungfernstieg 21

20354 Hamburg | Germany

<https://mecam.tn>

mecam-office@uni-marburg.de



ميكام
مركز ميربان
للدراسات المتقدمة
في المنطقة المغاربية



MECAM
Merian Centre
For Advanced Studies
In The Maghreb