



Shifting the Telos of Travel and Intercultural Brokerage through Islamic Diplomacy: Ahmad ben Mohamed al-Kerdoudi's Embassy to Nineteenth-Century Spain

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This article sheds light on the art of travel in the Islamic Maghreb, particularly with reference to diplomacy. While the traditional formation of travel came to be associated with an Islamic phenomenology, this paper argues that in the modern period the art of travel in the Islamic Maghreb underwent a paradigmatic shift in terms of its purposes and poetics. The first pertains to the expansion of its telos from an exclusively experiential religious horizon to the negotiation of various secular, particularly political undertakings. The second relates to the critical situatedness of travellers/diplomats as they navigated the ethical acuties of pursuing representational faithfulness while also doing their best not to hurt the sensibilities of the Moroccan Sultan or the interests of the state which they represented. Within the Moroccan ambassador Ahmad al-Kerdoudi's travelogue about nineteenth-century Spain, the enterprise of intercultural mediation reflects the porousness of the Mediterranean world not only in the spheres of theology and culture but also in that of diplomacy.

Keywords: travel, diplomacy, Islamic world, Islamic Maghreb Religion, secular, mediation, intercultural.

Ever since the formative years of the Islamic world, the art of travel, or *Rihla*, as it is known in Arabic, has been shaped by a religious proclivity towards performing Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, and/or by *Talab al-Iilm*, the search for knowledge, which takes a disciple on a learning journey to the centres of Islamic teaching, such as Cairo, Medina, Fez, and al-Qairaouan, as well as to holy sites associated with Muslim saints. In fact, the genre of *Rihla* particularly invoked images of the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, the fifth pillar of Islam. In all its manifestations, travel emerged as a means of showcasing the interconnectedness of the Muslim world through its centres of learning, mosques, and holy places. It was also a quest enabling travellers to wonder and ponder on Allah's manifestation in nature and the physical world. Assuch, the telos of travel necessitated a poetics that was in synchronicity with religious sanctity and unity, which pilgrimage and the search for knowledge represented in the imaginary of the Muslim *Ummah* (religious community).

In the Islamic Maghreb, and more specifically in Morocco, the art of travel flourished from the sixteenth century onwards (al-Maanuni 186–94). In fact, early modern travel (sixteenth - eighteenth centuries) can be divided into three categories: first, regionally limited travel within the contours of Morocco; second, religiously oriented travel which consisted of oral or written records documenting the experiences of pilgrimage and meeting erudite Muslim scholars; and third, foreign travel involving diplomatic missions and embassies, with authors reporting their impressions of other countries. Morocco dispatched embassies to Christian Europe, including France, Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Naples, Malta, and Austria. However, this article will focus on Spain as it was the country which received

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the greatest number of embassies from Morocco, due to its geographical proximity, colonial incursions, maritime activity, Morocco's strategic position as the closest gate to Europe,¹ and, last but not least, the interculturalism which characterized Moroccan exchanges ever since the time of al-Andalus.

My particular focus on the dialectic of travel and intercultural brokerage as a praxis, which is best embodied in diplomatic encounters, is motivated by a poetics which problematizes the mediational insularity between religious and secular cultures. In Morocco, the purpose of travel shifted paradigmatically from mainly revolving around travelogues to holy sites to narratives of diplomacy and cross-cultural exchanges. Such an alteration took place on account of the shift in power relations that characterized the international climate of the seventeenth century. This was also a period in which the solidification of Morocco as a sovereign Sultanate took place on multiple levels. The ascendancy of the Moroccan Sultan Sidi Mohamed ben Abdullah (1748, 1757 – 1790) to the throne in the second half of the eighteenth century epitomized the birth of a progressive worldview that strove to solidify a space for Morocco in international affairs, and simultaneously, to stabilize the state internally. This explains why diplomacy and international affairs became a priority. Additionally, the Moroccans drove the Portuguese from their coastal cities, thus consolidating the power of their military vis-à-vis any western encroachment on their lands and taking control of ports which facilitated trade with Europe (al-Maanuni 200).

The Moroccan Sultan Mohamed ben Abdullah was aware of the international atmosphere and the colonial aspirations of European states. This awareness is reflected even in the titles of the travelogues that were written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The shift which began to characterize Moroccan Muslim travel was epitomized in its purposiveness. Thus, cultural and political diplomacy concerned itself with the signing and negotiating of treaties, the ransoming of captives, the retrieving of stolen goods, and the management of maritime activities and commercial and intellectual exchanges. In the nineteenth century, Moroccan diplomatic accounts mostly focused on secular activities. However, since travel was dominated by an Islamic phenomenology in its formative years, its religious propensities manifested themselves within the contours of the political and the secular, demanding a peculiar intercultural mediational poetics of coming to terms with what we perceive in modern terms as the secular/religious divide.

The word “diplomacy” was used for the first time in the title of the Moroccan ambassador Mahdi al-Ghazzal's account *The Fruits of Struggle in Diplomacy and War* (1776) indicating the need as well as the urgency to keep up with the language as well as with the new world order that was becoming part of the global scene at the time. The strong interest in diplomacy and state craftsmanship differed markedly from the overarching nostalgic tincture that had characterized all prior diplomatic missions to Spain, and which was triggered by the fall of Islamic Spain in 1492 and the expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609. Moroccan forms of statecraft and diplomacy had a distinctive ethos that had developed in parallel to European international relations and foreign affairs. To my mind, unlike European diplomacy, Moroccan diplomacy embodied two complementary tendencies. The first one, which could be termed *mediational humanism*, involved an emphasis on actual travel and spontaneous encounters with people from all walks of life; it worked through issues and problems that came up in the process of trying to make sense of a new environment in the light of the rapid changes of the modern world as well as the authority of the Sultan. The second one was a form of statecraft that was culturally specific as it escaped the prescriptions of rigid bureaucracy under which state subjects were sent to fulfil a mission but they, in their capacity as subjects, had no real say in how it might unfold.

¹ In early modern and modern times, Spain, due to its geographical proximity and adjacency, received more Moroccan ambassadors than any other European country. Between 1500 and 1900 CE, Moroccan Sultans sent the following ambassadors: Mohamed ben Ibrahim al-Sufiani (1586), Mansour ben Yahya and Abdurahma al-Chawi (1614), Mohamed ben Abdulwahab al-Ghassani (1690), Ahmed ben al-Mahdi al-Ghazal (1755), Mohamed ben Uthman al-Maknasi (1779), al-Haj Mohamed al-Dlimi (1792), ‘Abas Safir Moulay Salama (1792), Prince Moulay Abbas (1861), Idriss ben Idriss al-‘Amrawi (1877), Abdusalam al-Sawisi (1877), al-Haj Abdulkarin Bericha (1879), Bouchta al-Baghdadi (1883), Abdusadik ben Ahmed al-Riffi (1885), al-Ma'ti al-Mzamri (1889), Abdulhamid ben al-Fatimi al-Rahmani (1891).

Additionally, Maghrebian diplomatic travel, as exemplified by Mahdi al-Ghazzal in the eighteenth century and Ahmad al-Kerdoudi in the nineteenth century, did not assume political separateness. Rather, it assumed relatedness and envisaged the world as existing in a constant state of regional relationality which would explain why most of the captives that were ransomed through diplomatic endeavours were not even Moroccan but came from different Muslim countries. Prior to al-Ghazzal's embassy, Sultan Abdullah expressed his views on world politics in a letter sent to Carlos III (1759–1788) informing the Spanish king that “in this interest is further proof ... that a Muslim with us is one of a kind, whether he be from our nation or from a country of strangers” (al-Ghazzal 55). In this framework, individuality or one's uniqueness is not predicated on separation from others, as it is in individualism. In fact, one's individual identity derives from a connection to others. Relations are physical and emotional, even if not always strategic. Additionally, these formations also symbolically extended the religious sovereignty of Sultan ben Abdullah over subjects that fell under the dominion of the Ottoman Empire.

Al-Ghazzal's use of words such as “brothers,” “sisters,” “dignitaries,” “our daughters” as well as “infidel,” “tyrant,” and “unbelievers,” are not merely strategic forms of addressing the Spanish. They carry within their usage relational loads that are framed within the political mission intended to be executed as well as the realization that the oppositionality that had characterized earlier relations between Muslims and Christians was beginning to give way to a new world order of international affairs. We see assumptions of commonality and mediating diversity in “everyday diplomacies” (see Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, and Henig), which build relations even though those participating in them may not be always aware of the diplomatic repercussions of their actions. We see such assumptions in “other diplomacies” (see Henders and Young), “indigenous diplomacies” (see Costa), and “sustainable diplomacies” (see Constantinou and Derian). Overall, diplomacy came to be seen as part of a larger, interconnected, and relational universe. A similar view was also in evidence in “cosmopolitan diplomac[ies]” (see Gulmez) and “humanity-centred diplomacies” (see Zaharna), which aimed to respond to the needs of the whole of humankind. Al-Ghazzal's diplomacy enriched the diversity of border crossings and stressed the need to add relational and cultural perspectives to diplomatic praxis.

Nabil Matar tells us that religion, which has mostly been assumed to be the pivotal image of oppositionality between Europe and the Islamic world, actually contributed to the solidification of Muslim-Christian relations during the early modern period. There was a certain degree of familiarity at the Muslim Maghrebian end that facilitated relations, treaties, trade, alliances, and numerous other relational forms which took place across the Mediterranean Sea. Matar states that the first and foundational factor that prevented such an oppositional discourse in Arab-Islamic thought of the Maghreb is Muslim respect for the “Prophet” of the Christians. No Muslim writer ever described Jesus in the vilifying manner that Christian writers described Mohammed. (“The Question of Occidentalism” 158)

The prophet Mohammed's teaching is held as a source of inspiration and guidance to Muslims. Tarif Khalidi tells us in his book *The Muslim Jesus* that from the beginning of Islamic revelation in the seventh century until the fifteenth century the figure of Jesus was embraced as a prophet of piety and devotion (28). Likewise, Matar advances the argument to include the writings of the following centuries where Maghrebian scholarship “redefined, and co-opted the central figures of Christian revelations,” which to my mind, set the tone for Muslim-Christian international relations, and most importantly, prevented the potential rise of any fundamentalist exegesis that might have cast Muslim-Christian relations as *Haram* (sin). From this perspective, as Edward Said commented on Khalidi's book cover, the idea of a clash of religious civilizations between Christendom and Islam, at least from the Islamic side, fades away (Matar, “The Question of Occidentalism” 158). The regularity with which Moroccans encountered Euro-Christians diversified their relations and inscribed them into the contemporary state of affairs. They met as enemies but also as partners and even friends, depending on the situation, which could be one of trade, diplomacy, or battle (Matar, “The Question of Occidentalism” 159). It is in this framework that we can resort to *pluritopic hermeneutics* (see Mignolo 9) to project an image of a polycentric world in which axes operate from a position of difference rather than alterity.

Within such an international landscape, the telos of travel changed to accommodate a rapidly changing world and, as such, necessitated a new mediational poetics which could include both secular and religious elements as well as the kaleidoscopic acuties of venturing into foreign lands and encountering the “Other,” while at the same time, retaining the religious dimension which characterized the phenomenon of travel in the Islamic world. The latter point was acutely present in a multitude of Moroccan travelogues to Europe because the travellers were writing under the shadow of the Sultan, who represented both religious and political authority in Morocco.

Ahmad al-Kerdoudi’s Embassy to Nineteenth-Century Spain: A Shift in Praxis

The travel account *al-Tuhfa al-Sunniya lil Hadra al-Hassaniya bi’l-Mamlaka al-Isbanyoliya 1885–1886* (The Sunni Masterpiece of al-Hassanian Presence in the Spanish Kingdom)² is credited to Ahmad ben Mohamed al-Kerdoudi. Unlike his predecessors, al-Kerdoudi did not lead the embassy, but was its official scribe. In 1885, he was chosen to be the scribe of an embassy to Spain, which was presided over by the ambassador Abdusadiq al-Rifi. It was not his first embassy outside Morocco; he had been part of an embassy commissioned to France with the ambassador al-Ma’ti al-Mzamri and an embassy to Italy with al-Tris. However, his embassy to Spain sets itself apart as it instantiates the mediational anxiety of attempting to make sense of the modern secular world of nineteenth-century Spain while preserving the traditional religious dimension.

Al-Kerdoudi’s narrative about Spain is arguably the most nuanced account in terms of its representation of Spanish military and material realities. Being a scribe in the Sultan’s court, he had an acute and meticulous eye for details. At the beginning of the account, al-Kerdoudi discloses that the embassy was not only intended “to renew the camaraderie, connection, and good relations between the two countries ascertaining it as it had been before and hoping for its permanence in the future” (28). It was also driven by a sharp curiosity to mediate the colossal leap of modernity that had fundamentally set apart western Europe since the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was a modernity that Arab travellers could not but admire, despite their apprehension that it was a modernity completely absent in their own regions, from Morocco to Arabia to Anatolia. As the travellers observed the inventions and institutions of the modern European state, they became confused about the Euro-Christians who were mastering the *dunya* (world) (Matar, “Moroccan Eyes” 201).

The colonial incursion upon Moroccan harbours in the nineteenth century directed the attention of travellers towards a particular concern: the uncovering of the secrets behind European modernity. While in the early modern period Muslim travellers had tended to engage with the intellectual basis of European modernity, in the aftermath of the defeats of Morocco in the battles of Isly (1844) and Tetouan (1860), Moroccan travellers saw the advancement of Europe as fundamentally related to technological and military developments. The mediational poetics which characterized al-Kerdoudi’s account stemmed from two axes. First, he was being categorically faithful in terms of his depiction of everything he encountered in Spain because he was commissioned by the Sultan to carry out such work, and as such there was no commercial dimension which could lure him into fantastical representations of Spain as was the case with western travel accounts to the Islamic world. Second, any form of flattery to Spain could be interpreted in negative terms by the Sultan and as such it could endanger the position of the traveller.

In such cases, writing almost becomes a matter of life and death, and al-Kerdoudi resorted to depicting what he saw accurately but also made a point of producing a comparative analysis which was complimentary to the Moroccan side. The poetics of the travelling self thus became a mediational exercise caught up between truth and untruth, between religious and political concerns. Al-Kerdoudi’s nuanced representations of Spanish harbours, ships, cannons, fortresses, military conduct, and discipline, “the ship of the land” [i. e. the train], and everything he assumed to contribute to Spanish modernity did not generate a sense of disdain nor did it prevent him from appreciating the beautiful aspects of Spain and Spanish life, such as urban and recreational areas, museums, barns, zoo, diamonds, architecture, and cordiality. Statements like “there are shops inside the city whose beauty dazzles the mind and pleases the

² All translations from al-Kerdoudi’s travelogue are mine. A. G-I.

eye, and many splendid markets that contained elegant masterpieces” (Al-Kerdoudi 50), are tempered with comments on Spanish traditional garments which he saw “as a demonstration of what the belated have reached out of civilization, and how Bedouin their predecessors used to be” (51).

The complexity of al-Kerdoudi’s travelogue rests in the perceptual and attitudinal instabilities that the author experiences as he attempts to mediate various ambivalences simultaneously. Thus, when passing through Andalusian Islamic sites, which must have triggered a sense of nostalgic identification, he resorts to religious explanations or condemnations. He writes:

Among the things we found in this place – and we were regretful as we found it within the possession of the unbelievers – was one of the boards that our children study in, written on one of its sides: (Say, “O disbelievers”),³ and in another one (about what are they asking one another? About the great news, that over which they are in disagreement)⁴ but when we read those verses and pondered upon their marvellous shades of meaning which matched our state and what we had witnessed in the unbelievers and in the amelioration of their expertise, we started reiterating them [the verses], thanking God for the beneficence of Islam which is the greatest blessing and the foremost of commodities. (54)

Al-Andalus was the name that Muslims gave to the Iberian Peninsula during Spanish Muslims rule. It is not only a geographical and historical location; it is also a space in the cultural imaginary of Muslims and a reference in their collective memory. It is a reference and a memory of an opulent civilizational zenith, unrivalled culture, colossal intellectual achievements, fine architecture, and lush gardens. The culture of al-Andalus was characterized by fruitful co-existence between Muslims, Jews, and Christians and it has subsequently become a topos of nostalgic reference to the potential of religious tolerance among promoters of dialogue. Al-Kerdoudi’s tampering strategy utilized the feeling of loss and nostalgia generated by the memory of al-Andalus and Islamic remnants to balance out the striking difference between Moroccan and Spanish technological, military, and industrial might.

When al-Kerdoudi perceives that the Spaniards had destroyed a culture which was the envy of the known world and usurped its possessions, he unleashes his religious condemnation upon them. However, he also describes them as helpful and welcoming and praises them with sincere gratitude. He admires the cordiality with which the embassy was met in every city and never misses a chance to mention it. For instance, when they are about to sail from Tangier in a Spanish frigate, he mentions that the Spanish ambassador in Tangier “showcased utmost exuberance and delight for our advent to them and mentioned that he was immensely looking forward to our arrival to them for the adjacency, affection, and connection they share with us.” When the embassy reaches Madrid, he says, “we found their governor who met us with warmest greetings with the relatives and nephews of the ambassador of Tangier” (27). He also admires the strict legality that he witnesses at the Spanish court and praises the fairness of the judge. When he reaches the gates of the court he reports that “we found two men at the door ... each of whom held on their shoulders scourge-like white metal things [and were left with] the impression that whoever did not abide by the law would be scourged on his head, even if it were the judge himself” (37). Ahmad al-Kerdoudi thus demonstrates that his view of Europe is not shaped by religious polarity but by history and diplomacy. There are relatively few nostalgic breaks that are quenched by religious catharsis. Whereas the writings of European travellers to north Africa and the Levant were often dominated by religious polarization, and mostly expressed praise in relation to the land and its material output, al-Kerdoudi expresses genuine fondness when it is deservedly called for. For instance, when the embassy meets the judge of Cadiz he writes:

None of those we saw in Cadiz were more cautious or eloquent than him. His echelon is like the precedent one or perhaps close to it, for we found adherents and administrative officials next to the door and in his company. We left him admiring the scourging men and their aim which was intended to warn us. (43)

³ Surat al-Kafiroun (Disbelievers) is the name of the 109th chapter of the Quran.

⁴ Surat Naba is the 78th chapter of the Quran.

Throughout the entire travelogue, al-Kerdoudi makes a point of mentioning the commendatory gestures and warm greetings with which the embassy was received. The cordiality never seems to escape his attention and it is mentioned from the beginning of the journey until the end of it. Al-Kerdoudi's over-zealous attention to such activities is not merely intended to depict protocol but also to disclose to the Sultan the respect with which a Moroccan embassy was welcomed in Spain. An embassy to a foreign land in essence represented the Sultan, and for this reason any form of cordiality shown to his envoys should have indicated to him how highly esteemed he was.

Despite the conflictual disposition that sometimes might have shaped his attitude to Euro-Christians, and more so the Spanish because of the loss of al-Andalus and the place it held in the Muslim cultural imaginary, al-Kerdoudi and many other Moroccan diplomats understood the complexity of the reality they were venturing into. While a sense of rivalry and bitterness might have remained lingering in al-Kerdoudi's consciousness, his text was shaped by a historical consciousness that combined the secular with the religious and the historical with the political.

Confronted with Spanish military might, al-Kerdoudi could not but express his admiration and, through comparison with the Moroccan artillery, implicitly insinuate to the Sultan the urgency of reforming Morocco's technological and military capacity. While describing the towers of Cadiz, he writes:

This tower contains two cannons which are bigger than the six cannons standing in the seaport of Tangier, may God protect it. One of them weighs twenty-five tons and the other thirty tons, and their inside is incised with twisted gashes. Nonetheless, they are charged from their breeches in the rear, and not from their muzzles; therefore, they are used only by eight people, not fifteen, and their motion is lighter than the motion of the ones in Tangier. (44)

Throughout the entire text, comparative descriptions are so detailed that one would assume that they were made by an expert. Although al-Kerdoudi's sympathies are decidedly on the Moroccan side, his approach is nevertheless marked by objectivity. For example, this is what he says about the fortifications of Tangier:

[T]here is a spacious scaffold in the towers of Tangier where those in charge harmlessly work when they have to, and there are other advantages which proudly, usefully, and safely confer benefit upon the towers of Tangier, *yet it would have been wholly perfect if it had been possible for the cannons to be charged from their breeches* [my emphasis]. (44)

Al-Kerdoudi was undoubtedly aware of the fact that his text would be circulated within the Sultan's court, and for this reason he used his travel account to reflect upon conditions in his homeland. He developed what may be termed *strategic concessions* that enabled him to disclose his appreciation of the modern innovations and opulence he witnessed in Spain without undermining the sensibilities of the Sultan and his court. As such, travel writing became an enterprise suspended between religious authority and the secularity of the diplomatic institution, and the function of the author-traveller was to navigate the grey area between these polarities.

Al-Kerdoudi's thorough description of Spanish diplomatic culture was not only intended as a show of respect for the Sultan of Morocco, but it also insinuated that the modern international and diplomatic landscape made the reformation of Morocco's diplomatic enterprise a matter of urgency so that it could adapt to the changes which characterized modern international relations. In his travelogue he represents a sophisticated Spanish diplomatic culture, characterized by modern protocols, which he filters through the lens of Islamic ethics.

The reception of the diplomatic delegation appears to be of particular interest to al-Kerdoudi. Thus, he says that when the embassy arrived in Cordova, they were met by an army contingent "playing formidable music" and that the governor stated, "that Spain had the honour and great pleasure of our arrival, and he was very joyful and so were we" (48). His meticulous representation of diplomatic receptions, festivities, and royal accommodation reveals that he was obliquely insinuating that such etiquette should be adopted in Morocco as well. When the embassy reached Madrid, the Chief of Protocol

gathered us and our company allotting to each of us a place suited to his status, in which there was a bed, chairs, embroidered and silk-covered couches, mirrors, clocks, cups, kettles, and other needed and useful things. We were allotted a room where we receive dignitaries, but it had neither a bed nor a dining place because it was set for what had just been mentioned, and because they only dine in places set for dining, not in sleeping rooms or in sitting rooms. (48)

He clearly understands that such protocols were different from those of his homeland. His rendition of such a diplomatic etiquette is intended to showcase the respect paid to the delegation of the Sultan as much as it is an implicit invitation to integrate such protocols into the Moroccan diplomatic service. Additionally, he embraces a spirit beyond mere diplomatic activities: he sees himself as a chronicler of different cities. For instance, in Madrid, he provides information about the size of the population which, according to him, numbered “five hundred thousand men, women, and children” (66). He writes about the vastness of the land and the width of the roads that facilitated transportation and manoeuvre, and which he seems to have admired stating that they were so wide that “carts and coaches [could] pass by day and night like butterflies” (70). Such delineations could only be juxtaposed in relation to a pre-set place in his mind. The text implicitly develops a reformist discursive practice advocating the modernization of societal institutions in Morocco; al-Kerdoudi regards Spain’s transportational efficiency as a model for the infrastructure in his homeland. He writes that “in spite of the great number of their [carts and coaches] and the different speed [at which they move] ... traffic is never jammed and no accidents occur” (70). Such a statement is lucidly invoked against an image of Morocco where undoubtedly the roads were narrow, and the traffic suffocated the infrastructure of the country.

Al-Kerdoudi praises the beautiful fountains of Madrid, the picturesqueness of Spanish cities, art portraits of monarchs, embalment of animals, music, royal barns, the embroidery and embellishment used in covering saddles and the internal fabric of coaches, and the museum which was “among the places... we [went to] and were amazed when... we saw it” (72). He writes that “after we had ascended its stairs ... [we] were astonished by the various gorgeous and marble sculptures [in it]” and he seems to have had a particular pleasure in describing the punctuality and good organization of people in Spain. When the Moroccans were taken to see the royal means of transportation, he expressed high appreciation for their opulent decorations: “all of them were massive and covered with plates of gold, and some were adorned with gemstones and rubies, and furnished with silk fabric” (55). He was also impressed with the fact that “each one [held] the name of the king who once owned it” (55). When they visited the place to which the Spanish brought the extracted minerals to produce gold, diamonds, and gemstones, he was once again impressed with the good organization of the process. Thus, he mentions that “there was a paper next to [each mineral] which contained its name and the place where it was found” (57). His appreciation of Spanish culture is not fundamentally linked to his religion. However, while he admires Madrid for attaining “the beauty of civilization and contain[ing] shops with various commodities and wonderful masterpieces [in them]” (65), he cannot refrain from vituperating against the sculptures and paintings of Jesus and Mary:

[T]heir unbelief had led them to make portraits of human beings with wings claiming that they are pictures of angels; they also have a picture which they claim to be of Jesus, peace be upon him, naked except from his genitals which are covered with a leaf, and others which they claim to be of Eve, Mary, and Jesus as an infant, adolescent, and crucified. (66)

The disparity between Morocco and Spain which al-Kerdoudi witnessed could not but make him invoke Quranic verses and assume a position of superiority. The emphasis on his religious identity was part of a defence mechanism against that disparity. Muslim religious superiority was displayed in the face of Spanish worldly grandeur. Al-Kerdoudi was a keen observer, who enthusiastically recorded the worldly achievements of the “*ajam*” (Spaniards). His work contains none of the vilification of Spain that permeates many early modern west European travel accounts. He clearly enjoyed the discovery of Spanish modernity. His text offers meticulous descriptions and inserts foreign words, a practice that is

echoed in travel accounts from different cultures. Numerous transcribed Spanish terms appear in the text, sometimes translated, sometimes defined, most of them denoting alien goods, instruments, or names like *spirto*, carts which he translated as “*carnata*,” and cement as “*barsalana*.” These transcriptions give readers a more direct access to the foreign country and allow them to read and “hear” the language of the Other.

Conclusion

As a serious venture in the Islamic world, travel was encouraged ever since the beginning of Islamic expansion through the Arabian Peninsula. While in its early manifestations it was generally limited to pilgrimage, seeking knowledge, and visiting holy sites, in the nineteenth century a shift in purpose re-directed travel accounts towards the accommodation of experiences of cross-cultural mediation. In the Islamic Maghreb, particularly in Morocco, as early as the seventeenth century, delegations were dispatched to negotiate commercial and peace treaties, ransom captives, and/or demand compensation for losses incurred at sea. The enterprise of travel had to accommodate changes in the international scene, and as such, open a space for the cultural and the political within a previously dominant religious context. As a result, a new mediational poetics of writing emerged as a means of navigating secular incursions through a religious framework, heavily overshadowed by the figure of the Sultan, who was as much a religious authority as he was a political leader.

Al-Kerdoudi stands as one of the intellectual representatives of this change in perspective. The newly envisioned mediational acuties which developed in al-Kerdoudi’s account were shaped by an ethics of relationality and cultural mediation. His particular focus on novel elements, protocols, and etiquettes constituted a significant part of his mediational philosophy where transferring and mediating foreign information was not accepted blindly but was filtered through his religious phenomenology, and as a result, the act of mediation acquired a kaleidoscopic quality involving multiple complex layers reflecting as much the mediator as they did the mediated culture. This article hopes to have shed some light on al-Kerdoudi’s unjustly neglected travelogue which has not hitherto received sufficient attention.

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