The Poetics of Resistance and Memory in Moroccan Prison Writings

Azeddine CHERGUI
Duke University, USA

“The freedom within us is larger than the jails we are in”
(Syrian poet Faraj Bairqadar, as cited in Mohammad Ali Atassi, 2004)

Résumé,

Cet article examine les écrits testimoniaux de quatre détenus qui ont survécu à 18 années de détention à la prison secrète de Tazmamart. Je fais valoir l’argument que survivre à l’incarcération dans des conditions aussi inhumaines était le résultat de la résilience et de la résistance créatrice, alimentée par la spiritualité que les détenus découvraient / découvraient au milieu de la friche carcériale. Je fais aussi valoir que ces écrits carcéraux sont des reconstitutions subalternes de la mémoire collective qui contestent le compte historiographique de l’État sur les années de plomb.

Mots-clés: résistance; spiritualité; mémoire collective; Tazmamart; écritures de témoignage; littérature carcériale; les années de plomb;

Abstract

This article examines testimonial writings from four detainees who survived 18 years of detention at Tazmamart secret prison. I make the argument that surviving incarceration in such extreme subhuman conditions was the result of resilience and creative resistance, powered by spirituality that the detainees uncovered/discovered in the midst of the carceral wasteland. I also make the argument that these prison writings are subaltern reconstructions of collective memory that contest the state’s historiographic account on the Lead Years.

Keywords: resistance; spirituality; collective memory; Tazmamart; testimonial writings; Moroccan prison literature; Lead Years;

One of the most prominent themes in prison literature is human resilience in the face of the repressive and disciplinary apparatus of the carceral system. Across a wide spectrum of geography, history, cultures and political regimes, the prison writings of pro-democracy activists and dissenters of authoritarian regimes, who endured torture and survived abusive detention, have this in common:
1/ they testify to the will to survive and the ingenuity of human beings to resist and survive extreme, even sub-human, conditions of imprisonment.

2/ the published memoirs are testimony to the ultimate victory of truth over power, of pen over sword, and of memory over amnesia.

3/ the published memoirs represent an exaltation of the aesthetics of self-making or, in the words of Iliana Sora Dimitriu, prison writing is “a back-translation of daily suffering into one’s own higher vision of the self.” (as cited in Larson, 2010:147)

Reading the testimonial writings of those who miraculously survived eighteen years of detention in the Tazmamart gulag, such as Ahmed Marzouki, Aziz Binebine and Mohammed Rais, they all seem to have emerged from their long and traumatic incarceration as mature, wiser and forgiving human beings. Though the mental and physical wounds of Tazmamart have lingered for years after their liberation, they have repeatedly asserted in their writings and media interviews, that they bear no grudge against their former tormentors and torturers. Rather than being fixated on revenge and demanding that their former torturers be brought to justice, these three writers, as well a host of other Lead Years victims, have emerged from incarceration as democracy advocates, and proponents of a new social contract where human rights are a public good, not a privilege. Thus, they have sidelined a vindictive desire to settle old scores with the actors of state violence, for the loftier goal of partaking in the establishment and dissemination of a human rights culture in the country. Yes, they are also animated by a desire to fulfill a solemn promise to their dead fellow inmates: to keep memories of their suffering alive in the public sphere and collective memory, so that their sacrifices do not go in vain, to ensure that the gross human rights violations of the past are not reproduced in the future.

In this article, I will discuss some of the survival strategies deployed by Tazmamart survivors in the following published memoirs and interviews: Zanzāna Raqm 10 by Ahmed Marzouki, Tazmamort by Aziz Binebine and Mudhakirāt Muḥammad al-Rays, mina al-skhirāṭ ila Tazmamārt and Driss Chbirek.

Resistance from within: The Hidden Transcript

Zanzāna Raqm 10, Tazmamort and Mudhakirāt Muḥammad al-Rays: mina al-skhirāṭ ila Tazmamārt chronicle eighteen years of detention in a secret camp in solitary confinement, in a small cell, in total darkness. The rare moments light illuminated the cell was when the guards opened the metal cell door to distribute meager food rations, typically consisting of small portions of plain stale bread, tasteless chickpeas and vermicelli, to the starving detainees. The latter had to endure extremely hot summers.

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and “Siberian” cold winters with only two thin blankets each, and wearing the same clothes for the whole duration of their detention. The detainees had to endure extremely hot summers and “Siberian” cold winters with no change of clothes. They had no access to health care, no running water, permanently inhaling the nauseating stench of sewage and disease, cohabiting with mosquitoes, scorpions and snakes, under the watchful eye of sadistic and mostly indifferent prison guards.

In a 2014 interview with Abdeslam Maghraoui, Marzouki still vividly recalls the horrible living conditions in Tazmamart, 23 years after his liberation. This is his first impression of the carceral space, as the prison guards uncovered his eyes and introduced him to cell 10:

“When our vision adjusted slightly to the darkness, we discovered through a thin ray of light coming from a hole in the ceiling that the cell measured about three meters long and two and a half meters wide, with a height of four meters. On the left or the right of the cell (depending on the arrangement of that cell) there was a simple, narrow hole, directly on the floor. This served as a toilet. Above, at a height that was at the edge of the roof over our heads, there were three rows of holes for ventilation. On the wall opposite to the door, a big slab of cement had been cast, measuring one meter in height and width. It was on this cold and hard surface that we spent 6,550 nights with two worn bedcovers that smelled like cattle or donkey, a plastic plate, and a carafe of water. In winter, temperatures were often below thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit (zero degrees Celsius), and the cold season lasted at least eight months. Summer, which lasted three months, followed abruptly and brought oppressive, suffocating heat, and all sorts of predatory animals, including roaches, scorpions, and even snakes. We could hear the sound they made when they fell from a wall or the ceiling, but we couldn’t see them in the darkness. Strangely, only one or two detainees were ever bitten. Our bodies were so repulsive, not even scorpions dared approach us. There were fifteen rotating guards, human robots, illiterate and cruel, who were strictly instructed never to speak with us.” (Maghraoui, 2015)

In chronicling their detention at Tazmamart, Ahmed Marzouki and Mohammed Rais and Aziz Binebine have all stated that, as soon as they became aware of the subhuman conditions of detention that the prison administration had punitively planned for them, they concluded that unless they built a solid \textit{esprit de groupe}, they would have no chance of survival. The importance of resistance through collective organization is asserted early on in \textit{Cell 10} by Marzouki:

[The intelligent among us understood that our stay at Tazmamart would not be short, and that we had to organize ourselves and resist with every means available to us to keep our spirits high, or at least, preserve a]
glimmer of hope to allow us to continue on this hellish trajectory until God decides of our fate.] (Marzouki, 2002:95) (My translation) ¹

This quote articulates one of the key pillars in the inmates’ resistance strategy, namely to counter the debilitating effect of solitary confinement by organized collective action. Opposing the isolationist prison policies, intended to break the will of the detainee and pushing him progressively to slow death or suicide, with a collective, solitary and resistant “We”. Resistance through collective action in conditions of solitary confinement seems like an oxymoron, yet it was achieved primarily by intramural voice communication. Despite the camp’s prohibition on inmate-to-inmate or guard-to-inmate communication, the detainees were able to talk to each other through the walls, strengthen group solidarity and foster a sense of community. At Tazmamart, sound from each individual cell was carried through three little aeration holes in the ceiling. The acoustics in the metal-roofed building were such that if more than one person spoke at the same time, the sound would get amplified into a cacophonic noise that the inmates have described as debilitating; hence the rationale for the detainees’ implementation of the rule that they speak one at a time, as per their self-imposed code of ethics.

Interestingly, the 58 detainees were divided into two groups of 29, housed in two cell blocks numbers 1 and 2. Marzouki states that adherence to strict group discipline and a “code of ethics” was the key reason for the lower mortality rate (7 deaths) in block 1 where he was detained. (Marzouki, 2002:73) Marzouki (2002:73) states that adherence to strict group discipline and a “code of ethics” was the difference between death and survival, and the key reason for the lower mortality rate (7 deaths) in block 1 where he was detained. The other reason Marzouki invokes to explain the higher survival rate in block 1 is the fact that most of its detainees were military officers, whereas most detainees in block 2 were cadets and other low-ranking military personnel. Due to their longer military training and experience, Marzouki adds, it was easier for the inmates in his block to adhere to the group activities schedule with rigorous military discipline. Faced with a slim chance of survival, the detainees deployed a counter strategy to strengthen their solidarity and utilize their individual skills as storytellers, Qur’an reciters, dream interpreters, counselors, poets, singers, to fight dehumanization and keep death at bay.

The inmates defeated the prison system by deploying a strategy based on what James Scott’s conceptualized as the “hidden transcript” of resistance which he describes as a “discourse that takes place “offstage” beyond direct observation by powerholders”. This hidden transcript involved the invention of a coded inmate language, “Tazmamarti dialect” that could not be “decoded” by their prison guards, and group reinforcement activities that included “storytelling, Qur’anic recitation, fictitious visits to Paris, and imaginary invitations over dexterously made, delectable dishes constituted the ingredients of this collective hidden transcript of resistance”. (Marzouki, 2002:20)

Brahim Elguabli argues that the heroic survival story from the Tazmamart death camp invalidates Foucault’s claim on the power of the prison as a disciplinary and rehabilitative institution that transforms dissidents into “docile bodies”. By defiantly

¹ All subsequent quote translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
writing their prison memoirs and engaging in human rights’ activism, after 18 years of disappearance in the Tazmamart death camp, the survivors showed the limits of the disciplinary powers of prison. (El Guabli, 2014)

Resistance and resilience in Tazmamart were strengthened by the detainees’ resolve to confront the *timelessness* of an indefinite incarceration. The implementation of a group activities schedule was precisely meant to regain control of the movement of “time”, inject a measure of “timeliness” and “predictability” in a timeless and a-temporal detention. To envision a typical day at Tazmamart, here is a paraphrased summary of the detainees’ daily activities schedule, as described by Ahmed Marzouki in the subsection “Attempt to organize daily life” in the chapter entitled “Stability at Tazmamart”.

As soon as a thin ray of light enters the cell through a tiny hole in the ceiling, usually accompanied by the sound of birds chirping, the inmates know that to be the dawn of a new day. The inmate on schedule for the task would read some Quranic verses loud enough for the other inmates in the block to hear. The end of the Quranic recitation is signaled by a prayer from the assigned reader, at which time the inmates engage in free conversation, read the Qur’an or sing, until the arrival of the guards at 7:30 to bring breakfast. The breakfast menu was of course not “à la carte”; it was invariably the same throughout the period of detention: “A cup with a drink tasting more like barley than coffee, almost without sugar, and which often caused us heartburn. 30 grams of plain bread during the first three months of detention”, before it was reduced by more than half, by order of the camp director Mohammed El Qadi, who sacked his first deputy for “being too generous”. (Marzouki, 2002:64) Breakfast is followed by a group session of Qur’anic recitation. Marzouki states that, initially, these sessions were led by two detainees who had memorized a few *ṣūrah* prior to incarceration. By the time the rest of the detainees memorized every *ṣūrah* which their fellow inmates had committed to memory, one of the guards, Taieb Louiz, surreptitiously smuggled into the camp a copy of the Qur’an and offered it to the detainees. This rare collaborative gesture allowed the inmates to memorize the whole Qur’an which, for most detainees in block 1, was a key factor in surviving their detention, as I will discuss later. At the end of the Qur’anic recitation session, the inmates engage in a “free discussion” until noon when the guards arrive to serve lunch. After lunch, they engage in a free conversation for a half hour until the call for *zuhr* prayer is made by detainee Almufaddal Almakouti, unanimously elected for this role, due to his exceptional vocal potential. The midday-prayer is followed by a mandatory 90-minute period of silence to allow the detainees who need it to take a nap. The end of the nap is typically announced by the call for *A‘sār* prayer. One hour after *A‘sār* prayer, the guards bring dinner which typically consisted of one laddle of insipid vermicelli soup. Immediately after the guards deliver dinner and leave the block, one of the two skilled storytellers, Ahmed Marzouki or Mohamed Rais, would entertain their fellow detainees for one to three hours by narrating a story, retrieved by memory from a book or a movie. The storytelling activity is usually brought to a close by the call for ‘Ishā’, the evening prayer. After the prayer, the inmates engage with their immediate cell neighbors in low-voice conversations for one hour before all talk is suspended and mandatory silence is observed.
Thus, the inmates’ implementation of a daily schedule, in an otherwise chaotic carceral environment, designed to strip them of their humanity, is part of their counter strategy to resist and reassert their humanity. Adherence to a daily activities schedule allows them to counter indefinite incarceration with structured temporality, and inject a sense of agency and predictability to their timeless and forceful detention.

In Tazmamort (notice the pun on the name combining “Tazma” and “Mort”) Aziz Binebine also recounts how he un-covered his two vocations, as “storyteller” and “time custodian” while in detention:

« En plus du conte, je me trouvai une autre vocation : « gardien du temps ». Je commençai à tenir un calendrier avec pour point de départ le jour de notre arrivée. J'enregistrai la date grégorienne et celle de l'hégire et je la mis à jour quotidiennement. Le tout mentalement bien sûr. Puis je m'attaquai à l'horloge avec l'aide des oiseaux, d'un lointain cri de muezzin et de bruits divers. J'arrivais à deviner l'heure à quelques minutes près, cela me permettait de m'occuper et de me sentir utile; et puis, capturer ainsi le temps était une manière de lui échapper. » (Binebine, 2009:55)

[In addition to storytelling, I found myself another vocation: “time custodian”. I started keeping a calendar with the starting point as our day of arrival. On a daily basis, I updated both the Gregorian and the Hijri dates. Everything done mentally, of course. Then I focused on the clock with the help of birds, a faraway muezzin call to prayer and other various sounds. I was able to guess the time almost to the minute, and this allowed me to stay busy and feel helpful. And besides, capturing time was also a way to escape it.] (My emphasis)

“Capturing time in order to escape it” is an oxymoron that appropriately fits in the context of a secret detention that’s de facto a-spatial and a-temporal. It should be pointed out that when the detainees were transferred from Kenitra civil prison to Tazmamart, they were never informed about the duration of their jail sentences in the new camp. Based on the macabre atmosphere of the camp, the detainees reached a logical conclusion that their detention would be long and “timeless”. The timelessness of the incarceration is obviously part of the punitive “paraphernalia” that was prepared for them. Marzouki’s reiteration that his incarceration lasted 6947 days, intentionally quantified in days, rather than years, is an assertion of a symbolic victory on the temporal front. His recollection of time in prison numbered in days is an affirmation of the resilient will to resist and survive. (Marzouki, 2009:65) It’s a gesture that could be articulated out in the following script: “I have survived my horrendous detention; here I am well and alive to tell it all in my prison memoir”. Likewise, the sense of discipline and structure conveyed through the detainees’ self-imposed routine, outside the purview of the prison guards, is another symbolic victory in their struggle to circumvent the punitive measures of the carceral system. Despite the limitations of solitary confinement, the darkness, the cold and the insalubrity of the cells, the inmates are able to reconstruct a de-territorialized sociality and sense of community. They reinvented themselves as storytellers, muezzins, interpreters of dreams, entertainers, and defeated a detention scheme that sought to rob them of their humanity, dignity and group solidarity.

Marzouki points out that the storytelling session, which offered an opportunity to zoom out of a traumatic incarceration, was the favorite part of the detainees’ time at
Tazmamart. He and Mohammed Rais became the inmates' preferred storytellers in block 1. Here is how he praises the storytelling skills of Mohammed Rais:

كان محمد الرايس يتمتع بموهبة خارقة في سرد القصص والأفلام، متمكنًا من جميع التقنيات التي تشيد المستمع إليه شداً وتغوص به في عالم سحري يبني في نفسه مكانه زمنه. وقد كان يتفنن في سرد التفاصيل والجزئيات ليزيد في القصة تشويقًا وإثارة ولبندد بذلك المتعة أطول وقت ممكن. وقد حكي لنا ذات مرة قصة

[Mohammed Rais was exceptionally gifted for narrating stories and movies, mastering all the techniques that captivate the listener and transport him to a magical world wherein he forgets who he is, when and where he is. He used to excel in ornamenting his stories with details that add suspense and excitement to the narrative and prolong the pleasure as long as possible.] (Marzouki, 2002:97)¹

The detainees' exemplary organization and strict adherence to their code of ethics also sets them in sharp contrast with the prison guards who are mostly depicted as "vicious", "sadistic" and "corrupt" in the Tazmamart testimonial literature. There are, however, depictions that transcend this Manichean good-evil binary and project a much more nuanced and humane re-membrance of the guards. Some of the guards were intrinsically good and showed occasional acts of kindness to the inmates whenever they could circumvent the watchful eyes of their colleagues. Ahmed Kharbouch, nicknamed the "virtuous man" by Ahmed Marzouki, falls into this category. He is remembered for his compassionate cooperation "smuggling in" medications to the inmates and relaying messages to their families during the early phase of detention. Unfortunately, he paid dearly for his generosity when a fellow prison guard snitched on him and ended up himself incarcerated at Tazmamart for six months, despite his advanced age and deteriorating health.

In contrast, there were other prison guards who got "humanized" over the years as they interacted with the inmates. In the following passage Ahmed Marzouki captures the evolving dynamics in the detainees-guards relationship:

¹ The prisoners’ self-empowerment through creative ways of controlling time is also chronicled in prison memoirs from other detention centers. In her memoir Etre au Féminin, Maria Charaf (1997 :26) recounts her own technique to resist carceral atemporality at Derb Moulay Chérif: « Je n’ai aucune idée sur la durée de ma détention: un jour? Une semaine? Un mois? Un an? À vie? Vraiment, je n’ai aucune idée, tout est tellement aléatoire dans de telles affaires! …Alors, je tire un fil assez épais de l’une des couvertures et je le noue 3 fois. Désormais, à chaque fois que le gardien me donne mon pain quotidien le matin, je rajoute un nœud. C’est déjà ça de gagné, car cette maîtrise du temps, bien que toute relative, m’apporte un certain apaisement.» [I have no clue about the duration of my detention: one day? one month? for life? I really have no idea. All is unpredictable in these situations. So I pulled a thick thread from one of the blankets and I knotted it three times. From then on, each time the guard brought me my daily ration of bread in the morning, I added a knot. That was already a small victory, because this mastery over time, albeit relative, brought me some contentment.]
Let's go back to our guards to say that most of them were illiterate and thick-hearted. They only mastered the language of iron and fire. Nevertheless, the deadly routine of long years together weaved some strange intimacy between us, which made us look diligently for ways to exploit the vulnerabilities in some, get closer to them, and eventually bribe them. In the end, they became indeed the link between us and the world outside. (Marzouki, 2002:74)

In Tazmamort, Aziz Binebine also engages in a deeper comparative reflection on the impact of the Tazmamart detention on both inmates and prison guards:

“Si Tazmamart a gravé en nous, détenus, des traces indélébiles, il n’a pas laissé indemnes tous ceux qui l’ont côtoyé. Les gardes, par exemple, étaient persuadés que les lieux étaient hantés. Ils appréhendaient de venir seuls au deuxième bâtiment. Les sentinelles prétendaient entendre des cris et des gémissements venant de là, alors que nous qui nous y trouvions n’entendions rien…Nos propres morts ne nous hantaient pas, car nous avions prié pour eux en groupe dans l’obscurité. Pour nous, ils étaient passés dans l’autre monde.

En revanche, ancrés dans leurs traditions, leurs croyances aveugles, les gardes ressentaient vivement le manque de rituel, de sépulture, ils étaient donc hantés. Ils nourrissaient leur propre terreur. Le but de Tazmamart était atteint, un mythe était né qui frapperait désormais l’imaginaire.” (Binebine, 2009:112)

If Tazmamart has left us, detainees, with some indelible marks, it did not spare all those who were around us either. The guards, for instance, firmly believed that the place was haunted. They were fearful of entering cell block 2 alone. The sentries pretended hearing screams and moaning coming from our building, even though we, its residents, did not hear anything…Our own dead did not haunt us, because we had prayed for them in total darkness. For us, they had crossed to the other world.

In contrast, well moored in their traditions, their blinding beliefs, the guards felt badly their lack of ritual, of burial rituals, and as a result they were haunted. They nourished their own terror. The goal of Tazmamart was achieved; a myth was born that would afflict the imaginary.

The Tazmamart impact which Binebine subtly delineates in this passage is of a cultural-religious nature. The eerie atmosphere of a detention in total obscurity seems to have paradoxically affected the guards more than the detainees. The latter are immune to the fear of the dark and the “supernatural” by dint of their religious faith, which was strengthened in incarceration. The guards, portrayed as lacking faith and education,
are however tormented by “devilish” sights and sounds that are perceived to be the figments of their “sickened” imagination.¹

From his irruption into the psycho-cultural “mindscape” of the guards, Binebine leaps into a reconstruction of collective memory in the next passage. He interjects a historical footnote that interestingly links the etiology of the guards’ beliefs and behavior directly to the French colonial legacy:

« Les gardes étaient des résidus de la colonisation, de pauvres hères qui avaient perdu leur âme après avoir vendu leur conscience a un système dont ils étaient les sous-produits et auquel ils n’avaient jamais rien compris. Ce système les a légués à un autre qui a fini de pomper ce qui restait en eux d’humanité. Je les plains, j’ai pitié d’eux. Puissent leurs enfants ne jamais savoir à quoi ils ont participé. » (Binebine, 2009 :113)

[The guards were the residues of colonization, miserable wretches who had lost their soul after selling their conscience to a system to which they were the by-products, a system they had never understood. This system passed them on to another that finished pumping out whatever humanity was left in them. I feel sorry for them, I pity them. May their children never know what they took part in.]

The culmination point of Aziz Binebine’s analysis of the guard-detainee dynamic relationship occurs in the last stage of incarceration, when some of the guilt-ridden guards, seeming to recover back their humanity, ask the detainees for forgiveness:

« Certains parmi eux eurent des déboires. Tout le monde a des déboires, mais quand on n’a pas la conscience tranquille et qu’on est superstitieux, on voit dans ses malheurs une malédiction. Ce fut notamment le cas de l’adjudant Ben Driss qui perdit deux enfants tour à tour dans des accidents. Il était l’un des plus impitoyables. Tout comme le sergent Salah qui est arrivé chez nous avec le grade de caporal; une véritable teigne, moyen de taille et maigrelet…Même ses collègues le craignaient, le soupçonnant de les espionner au profit de leur capitaine. Le sergent Salah tomba du haut d’une échelle et se fractura le bassin. Il passa toute une année à l’hôpital et ne put plus marcher comme avant.

Tous deux vinrent nous demander pardon en pleurant. Ils demandèrent aussi leur mutation, qui leur fut accordée à titre exceptionnel. D’ordinaire, les gardes non plus ne quittaient pas Tazmamart, condamnés à nous accompagner jusqu’au bout. » (Binebine, 2009 :114)

[Some of them experienced some misfortunes. Everyone has setbacks, but when we don’t have a clear conscience and we are superstitious, we see a curse in our misfortunes. This was the case for adjutant Ben Driss who lost two sons in consecutive accidents. He was one of the most pitiless. Just like Sergeant Salah who arrived to us with the rank of Corporal; he was a real ringworm, of medium height and thin… Even his colleagues feared him and suspected him of spying on them on behalf to of their Captain. Sergeant Salah fell from the height of a ladder and fractured his

¹ See the subsection “Spirituality as Resistance” for a more detailed discussion of spirituality at Tazmamart.
pelvis. He spent a whole year at the hospital and could never walk like before the fall."

Both of them came to us in tears asking for our forgiveness. They both asked for a transfer, which was exceptionally granted to them. Ordinarily, the guards too never left Tazmamart; they were condemned to accompany us till the end.

**Competing Historiographies**

Engaging in the delineation of competing historiographies is a dominant trend in Moroccan prison literature, one that provides the incentive to prison writers to write in order to correct the record on how the nation re-members its past. Fatna Elbouih created narrative space for fellow inmates in her prison memoir *Talk of Darkness*, so did Mohammed Rais, Ahmed Marzouki and Aziz Binebine in their writings. The embedding of their deceased cellmates’ voices into their prison story is motivated by a desire to restore their humanity and dignity, albeit posthumously. The attempt to immortalize these victims of state violence is accomplished textually through the restitution of their identities, e.g. replacing their assigned prison number with their real name, highlighting their pre-incarceration life story, and attesting to their exemplary moral character.¹

In the chapter entitled “The Prisoners & the Prison Guards” in *Tazmamart: Zanzana Raqm 10*, Marzouki offers contrasted depictions and individual historiographies of his fellow detainees and their prison guards. Beyond the individual portraits, the subtext of this chapter is to highlight the arbitrariness of the justice system in the Lead Years. Marzouki highlights the inmates’ resilience and inherent goodness, which contrast sharply with the cruelty and corruption of most of the prison guards.

One of the most illustrative examples in this same chapter, “The Prisoners & the Prison Guards”, is when Marzouki explicitly engages in a textual memorialization of his deceased fellow detainees. Whereas the prison guards de-personalize the detainees by replacing their real names with cell numbers, Marzouki provides a roster of all the dead detainees in both block 1 and block 2. To counter the erasure of subjectivity practiced systematically by the camp establishment, Marzouki memorializes his fellow inmates by stating their first and last names, military rank, prison sentence initially pronounced by the court of Kenitra ² and the year of death at Tazmamart. Marzouki’s intent is to restore humanity and a place in history to the dead inmates, who have been abused and dehumanized, in life and death. The dehumanization was such that the remains of the dead detainees were dumped by the prison guards in a pit without observance of a proper Muslim burial ritual. It was only a few years before the release of the surviving

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¹ It was common in Tazmamart, as well as in other secret detention centers, for prison guards to de-personalize detainees and call them by their cell numbers
² Most Tazmamart detainees had initially been tried by a court in Kenitra which pronounced jail sentences ranging from 3 to 10 years. They were all incarcerated at the civil prison of Kenitra before they were disappeared *en masse* and transported at night in military planes to Tazmamart. By mentioning the original shorter sentence pronounced by the civil court of Kenitra and contrasting it with the indefinite incarceration at Tazmamart, Marzouki is pointing to the injustice of the judicial system during the Lead Years.
In sharp contrast with his rehabilitative memorialization of the fellow inmates, Marzouki re-members the prison guards mostly as loyal “executants” of state violence. One illustration of the latter category is Mohammed El Qadi, the director of the Tazmamart prison camp. In his depiction of the camp director, Marzouki seizes the opportunity to interject a historical footnote on the rampant despotism of the Lead Years. Thus, we learn that Mohammed El Qadi was appointed for the job by Mohammed Dlimi, a Machiavellian army general who, at the end of his career, had plotted unsuccessfully to overthrow King Hassan II. El Qadi’s most distinctive qualities, that made him the fittest for the job of managing a secret detention camp, were his loyalty to his military boss and his “infinite sadism”. (Marzouki, 2002:76) He specifically instructed the prison guards to be merciless with the detainees, not to engage in conversations with them, and even incentivized the guards to spy on each other and report any dereliction of duty pertaining to these rules. Hence his decision to fire his deputy director, after only three months on the job, for suspicion of leniency and generosity in the food rations served to the inmates. El Qadi ordered a reduction of the detainees’ food rations by half; the rationale behind this decision was not just punitive, but also out of greed. The prison director used the operating budget of the prison to promote his own economic and financial gain, without accountability or oversight by anyone:

في السنين الأولى، كان دائم الحضور في السجن، يجمع الأخضر واليابس بجشع كان يستنكره حتى الحراس أنفسهم. فقد كانت الميزانية المخصصة للسجن والسجناء تذهب كلية إلى جبه ولا يبقى لنا منها سوى الفاتات. وطول السنوات الثلاث الأولى حرمنا من اللباس ومن الغطاء إطلاقاً إلى حد أصبحنا فيه حفاء عرآء نسر عوراتنا بأيدينا كلما افتح علينا باب الزنزانة. ثم انتقل إلى التغذية البيئة التي

[In the first years, his presence at the camp was constant, greedily seizing everything to himself, in a manner that was condemned even by the prison guards. The budget that was allocated to the prison and the prisoners used to go completely to his pocket except for a few crumbs that were left for us. During the first three years of our incarceration, he totally deprived us of clothes and blankets to the point that we became barefoot and naked, using our hands to cover our private body parts each time the cell door was opened.] (Marzouki, 2002:75)

To crown this re-membership of the prison director, Marzouki shares a “secret” that some prison guards had divulged to the prisoners: each time one of them died, El Qadi would pick up the phone and call Rabat to relay this coded message: “a bottle of coke just got broken”. In response, he would get back a similarly cryptic instruction: “Get rid of the broken pieces”. In an ironic twist that captures the zeitgeist of the era, two years before the surviving detainees’ release from detention, the director of this infamous prison camp was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and received a medal of honor “in recognition for his laudable services to the nation”. (Marzouki, 2002:77)
another twist of destiny, one that also illustrates the vicissitudes in the politics of memory, Marzouki recounts his surreal final encounter with El Qadi. The encounter takes place in the city of Meknes where he was on a visit to two former fellow Tazmamart inmates, several years after their release from the camp. One of his companions asked him if he wanted to see El Qadi, their former tormentor who, in his retirement, had become a daily customer at one of the city bars. Marzouki gladly accepted the offer and visited the bar where they found the dreaded prison-camp director sitting at a table, surrounded by an “army” of empty beer bottles and engaged in a bawdy conversation “about the belly and down under”. (Marzouki, 2002:282)\(^1\) Marzouki sat down to contemplate what he described as a tableau of degraded humanity. He was tempted to vent his long pent-up frustration and anger at the man who had overseen the death of 32 fellow detainees and tortured those who survived for 6947 days and nights, but he resisted the temptation, thinking that such an act would be an “honor” to this “base” man. To finish his demystification of this Lead Years icon, Marzouki (2002:283) closes with a “corrective” footnote that places El Qadi where he deserves to be in collective memory: “In 1998, El Qadi died at night like a bat and was buried like a criminal in the trashcan of History.” The History Marzouki refers to is one which is re-constructed by the subaltern voice of a camp survivor, intent on reversing the value system and the hierarchies of the Lead Years, by exalting the oppressed and vilifying the dictators.

Through the mechanism of the prison testimonial, Marzouki dislodges the perpetrators of state violence from their undeserved place in the zenith of history and re-places them in the trashcan of collective memory. By so doing, his testimonial becomes not just a camp survivor’s witness account, but a corrective gesture against amnesia and a means to articulate his personal remembrance of the past, his own re-construction of collective memory, from the liminal position of a former prisoner.

**Spirituality as Resistance**

Of the 59 inmates who suffered internment at Tazmamart, only 28 walked out alive from their detention when they were liberated after 18 years of disappearance. Interestingly, most of the 28 survivors revealed that their religious faith, whether strengthened or discovered in detention, played a primordial role in their survival and salvation, as attested by the prison memoirs of Ahmed Marzouki, Mohamed Rais, Aziz Binebine and Driss Chberreq.

What is even more intriguing is that the four of them were mostly secular and hedonistically enjoying the “pleasures” of life prior to detention. Ironically, one of the unintended consequences of their harsh incarceration is that the detainees survived and emerged from their long detention as “new born Muslims”. Being detained in underground dungeons, in an atmosphere evocative of the barzakh, where the demarcation line between life and death is literally and metaphorically blurred, the inmates describe their cells as “tombs” where they have been buried alive. In

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\(^1\) This is a Moroccan expression meaning “private parts”; in this context, Marzouki insinuates that El Qadi had a penchant for stories with heavy sexual content. In a previous chapter, he had described El Qadi as someone who is pathologically obsessed with his libido, based on stories shared by the prison guards about his frequent nocturnal orgies.
The Poetics of Resistance and Memory in Moroccan Prison Writings

Tazmamort, this is how Aziz Binebine describes the dungeon when he was first “thrown” into cell 13:

« Dès que la porte fut fermée, je me retrouvai dans la pénombre. Il planait un silence lourd. Même les oiseaux s’étaient tus. Le bruit des brodequins des militaires et le claquement sec des loquets et des portes n’arrivaient pas à trancher le vide qui régnait dans mon âme et mon ésprit. Je regardais ce trou sans vraiment y croire. Il me faisait penser aux caveaux des chrétiens. L’idée me fit sourire. Comme si la mort avait une religion! » (Binebine, 2009 :44)

[As soon as the door was closed, I found myself in the dark. There was heavy silence around. Even the birds became silent. The sound of the military boots and the clicking of the latches and the doors did not cut the invasive emptiness I felt in my mind and soul. I looked at this pit in disbelief. It made me think of Christian vaults. The idea made me smile. As if death had a religion!]

The pervasive silence and the description of the prison cell in sepulchral imagery sets the tone for an excessively harsh imprisonment where death is apprehended as an imminent reality by the detainees. The invocation of Allah in a carceral space where the concept of mercy is totally absent becomes a spiritually soothing weapon in the detainees’ resistance “arsenal. While the camp is designed to break the will of the inmates, pushing them slowly but surely closer to the grave, spirituality makes it possible for the detainees to endure their ordeal as a test of faith and bolsters their belief in the possibility of salvation.

Aziz Binebine shows a predisposition to take this salutary spiritual journey from the moment he opened his eyes to the dark reality of the cell. He knew that the transformative experience of self-making or re-making, from a prestigious army officer to a nameless prisoner “number 13”, had to start from day one:


[When I heard the door bolts snap like gongs, I understood that we were going to be here for a long time. I decided then to forget the outside. I no longer had a family, friends, intimate memories or a future. I was here and only here. My cell was my universe. My companions in adversity were my society; my culture and my faith were all my wealth. It was imperative to let go, forget the “Whys” and the “Hows”.

Binebine embarks on a Sufi-like ascetic journey, accepting to break with his past, be stripped of all the material perks of life and reconstruct his wellbeing around his bare cell and the audible voices of his fellow inmates. The secret detention camp, clearly designed to punish and kill rather than discipline or rehabilitate, has had the unanticipated consequence of producing conditions propitious for spiritual regeneration and, what the survivors describe as, a deeper connection with the Divine. In its abject
harshness, it triggered in the inmates a willingness to sacrifice their material being and adjust to extreme frugality and self-abnegation. Thus, in all its abject and horrible reality, the death camp is “de-territorialized”, re-appropriated as a sacred space. A similar thought is echoed by Driss Chberreq, former Tazmamart detainee, in an interview with Moroccan daily newspaper *L’Opinion*:

« *L’Opinion*: A votre retour de Tazmamart, vous étiez vus comme les Hommes de la Caverne revenus au monde des vivants.

Driss Chberreq: On disait de nous les «Gens de la caverne» (*Ahl Alkahf*) mais on ne croyait pas si bien dire, car cette appellation nous allait en réalité comme un gant à cause surtout de l’expérience de la foi très profonde en Dieu que nous avions vécue et qui nous a sauvés du moins ceux qui ont pu survivre. J’en témoigne dans le livre. Nous avions touché au fond, l’extrême limite que peut supporter la personne humaine physiquement et moralement. Le fait que nous ayons appris le Coran par cœur en de longues séances de récitation a fini par transformer notre mouroir en une sorte de lieu de culte. C’était une grande expérience spirituelle.”

[L’Opinion: Upon your return from Tazmamart, you were perceived as the Men of the Cave returning to the world of the living.

Driss Chberreq: They used to call us the “People of the cave” but they did not realize how appropriate this nickname was because it fit us well, mostly because of the profound faith experience that we had lived, and that saved us, at least those of us who were able to survive. I have documented this in my testimonial book. We had reached bottom, the extreme point that a human being can reach physically and mentally. The fact that we learned the Qur’an by heart over long recitation sessions has transformed our death camp into some sort of place of worship. *It was a great spiritual experience.*] (My emphasis)

As this quote illustrates, through their will and resilience, the detainees are able to turn carceral space against itself. They manage to subvert its lethal scheme and turn the prison camp into a “shrine”, to re-member and preserve their humanity. Being positioned in an existential *barzakh*, a liminal space where the borderline between life and death is permeable, the detainees manage to transcend corporal pain and hunger, survive through spiritual regeneration and their strong belief in divine compensation for their suffering.

In an interview with Abdeslam Maghraoui, Marzouki was asked about the role religion played in their survival and whether there were moments of existential doubt along the way. Here is his response to the last, but most relevant, question in the interview:

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"We were all Muslims by birth and faith, but even those who were practicing Muslims did so moderately. Obviously we did not have a deep knowledge of Islam and most of us were, despite our unwavering faith in God, enjoying all the pleasures of life. However, in Tazmamart some young detainees were praying diligently and we all began to learn Hadiths and entire chapters of the Qur’an. Those who knew more about Islam and Islamic traditions taught us. Then a guard secretly gave us a copy of the Qur’an. In the emptiness, the anguish, and despair we were living in, that faith, which was dormant and well hidden in the depths of ourselves, suddenly resurfaced when everyone was trying to hold on to something. That thing was God. I remember a comrade taking pride in being a convinced communist to the core (he never stopped talking about Marx and Lenin), who changed radically and embraced Islam after a long period of meditation. All of us began to learn the Qur’an. It was our unique salvation as we were scared to die and be punished for all the sins we had committed before our incarceration. Some thought that what was happening to them was a divine punishment that came just in time to redeem themselves."

This quote captures the essential elements that were conducive to the possibility of salutary religiosity and spiritual rebirth at the Tazmamart “wasteland”, even for inmates who used to perceive themselves as secular “sinners” before incarceration. The “emptiness” and the darkness of the camp helped bring their “dormant” faith back to the surface, even converting inmates who were known to be fervent Marxist-Leninists (i.e. atheists).

Likewise, in *Tazmamort*, Aziz Binebine (2009:45) explicitly reveals that he took his “divinely written” predicament as a test of faith, despite being catapulted from the heights of military prestige, wealth and comfort into a tomb-like dark cell, forced to cohabit with scorpions, snakes, spiders and the daily smell of death:

"… la sentence du Ciel, que j’acceptais sans condition comme une épreuve, un test, une croix. La mienne. Pour moi la vie est un examen de passage. Il y a ceux à qui Dieu donne tout, et ceux à qui il enlève tout ; il observe les réactions de chacun. Je reste persuadé que s’il m’avait tout donné j’aurai échoué, je serais aujourd’hui un vieux général ventru, alcoolique et corrompu. »

[...God’s sentence, I accepted without condition like a test, a cross. Mine. For me life is a rite of passage. There are those to whom God gives everything, and those from whom God takes everything. He observes everyone’s reaction. I have the conviction that if he had given me everything, I would have failed; by now, I would have become an old fat-bellied, alcoholic and corrupt general.]

Tragically, in the Tazmamart barzakh, which literally and metaphorically was experienced by the detainees as an interstitial space that was both life and death and neither, those who were unable to “forget” and detach themselves from their memories of the world they left behind, were the first to die, succumbing to dementia or suicide.

Binebine (2009:67) opens his testimonial by a memorial dedicated to his dead fellow inmates, admitting that “religion helped me overcome madness and death which always hovered around my illusions and naïveté”. He starts by re-membering the
detainee nicknamed Chmicha (little sun), who was an air force officer at the time of his military career at the time of his incarceration, also known for his strong emotional attachment to his mother. He was the first to die after six months of detention at Tazmamart. So anchored in the material world, and losing hope in any possibility of salvation, Chmicha could not rationalize the sudden twist of destiny that propelled him from his former cozy existence, where he was surrounded by immense motherly love, into a secret dungeon at the mercy of merciless prison guards:

« Jusqu’à son dernier souffle, Chmicha n’a jamais compris ou admis ce qui lui arrivait, sa présence dans ce trou. Il ne comprenait pas pourquoi sa vie, sa carrière dont il était si fier, ce rang dans la société qu’il avait acquis à la force du poignet, pourquoi tout cela était parti en fumée… Il lui était particulièrement difficile d’admettre qu’il ne verrait plus sa mère qui avait une place unique dans son cœur et à laquelle, je pense, il devait tout. Il perdait la raison, et cessa de se nourrir et de se couvrir. Il passait de longues heures assis par terre dans le froid et la solitude de sa démence, aux côtés, croyait-il, de sa pauvre mère qu’il voyait toute proche dans la pénombre de son purgatoire. » (Binebine, 2009 :68)

Till his last breath, Chmicha had never understood or accepted what had happened to him, his presence in this hole. He did not understand why his life, his career that he was so proud of, this rank in society that he had earned by the force of his fist, why did all of this go up in smoke… It was particularly difficult for him to admit that he would not again see his mother who had a special place in his heart and to whom, I believe, he owed everything. He lost his reason and stopped feeding and covering himself. He spent long hours sitting on the floor in the cold and in the solitude of his dementia, in the company, so he believed, of his mother that he saw so close in the darkness of his purgatory.

By contrast, detainees from the “spiritual club”, like Binebine, “remembered” that life was but a test, an “entry exam”, and were able to adjust to their transient but long passage through the Tazmamart barzakh. The detainees’ daily ritual of Qur’anic recitation and memorization played an important part in the memory dynamics of “remembering” and “forgetting”. There are several passages in the Qur’an that “remind” the believer of the virtue of patience and perseverance in times of adversity; that the believer’s path through life is fraught with trials, tribulations and hardships; that those with patience and perseverance will be eventually be rewarded. The finality of reward is predicated on the remembrance of God and on not losing faith in his salvatory intervention, regardless of how hard and harsh the circumstances are. This theme is illustrated in an often-quoted verse from the Quran (13:28):

الذين آمنوا وتعطُمْنَ قلوبهم بذكر الله ألا يذكرون الله تطعُمْنَ القلوب

“...those who believe and their hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah. Truly in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest. (13:28)” (Translation: Mahmood; italics mine)

Interestingly, the spiritual moments when the inmates engaged in Quranic recitation and memorization are referred to in Arabic as dhikr which is the act of “remembering” through “uttering”, such as in the ritual of Qur’anic recitation. Additionally,
the word "dhikr" comes from the same root that other memory-related words are derived from like dhākira (memory), tadhkīr (reminder) and dhikra (memorial). These words cover an important part of the semantic spectrum of testimonial prison literature; a literature that is motivated by the desire to inscribe itself in collective memory writing and re-writing. Likewise, prison writings are intended as reminders so that lessons from the past serve to guide the present. Given humans’ propensity to forget, it becomes imperative to emit reminders, testimonial writings, to memorialize those who were tortured and/or disappeared, so that the gross human rights violations of the past are remembered, and hopefully not reproduced in the future.

The detainees’ recourse to spirituality as a form of resistance was not specific to the Tazmamart detention camp. Carving out a space for spirituality in the midst of a heavily repressive incarceration is also reported in prison writings from other torture centers from the Lead Years. A case in point is Abdelaziz Mouride’s On affame bien les rats! (2000) Mouride’s memoir mostly chronicles the miserable conditions of detention, including a graphic inventory of the torture techniques deployed by “violence workers” in state prisons. Yet there is one scene where spirituality unexpectedly erupts into the narrative. At the Central prison of Kenitra, in the middle of the courtyard where the inmates are temporarily allowed to come out to “breathe” some fresh air and see the sun, there is a dome-shaped stone that the inmates flock to for spiritual solace and repose. Interestingly, the stone is named Lalla Chafia (the healing lady Saint). Next to the picture of this spiritual icon, Mouride provides a commentary which slides from the stone’s little story into a snapshot at the nation’s post-independence history:

« Là, au beau milieu de la cour, une pierre dressée, témoin muet et imperturbable du temps qui s’écoule, une sorte de sérénité semble se dégager de ce roc que les intempéries indiffèrent. C’est pour cela qu’il fut baptisé Lalla Chafia “la Guérisseuse” par les générations de pèlerins qui se sont succédées autour d’elle…si Lalla Chafia avait pu parler, elle aurait raconté la souffrance de milliers de prisonniers politiques, depuis la fin de l’époque coloniale, jusqu’à la fin des années 80. Certains n’ont fait que passer, avant que l’on décide de leur mort, d’autres ont eu tout loisir de faire sa connaissance et, de s’accommoder de sa présence, là, au beau milieu de la cour, de s’inspirer de son calme et de sa solidité. » (Mouride, 2000 :35)

[Here, in the middle of the courtyard, a standing stone, silent and unperturbed witness to the time that flows by, some sort of serenity seems to emanate from this rock indifferent to inclement weather. For this reason it was named Lalla Chafia “the lady Healer” by successive generations of pilgrims that circled around it…if Lalla Chafia could speak, she would be able to tell about the suffering of thousands of political prisoners, since the end of the colonial period, until the end of the 80’s. Some only passed by while awaiting their execution; others have had the pleasure of enjoying its company, accommodating themselves of its presence, here, in the middle of the courtyard, inspired by its serenity and strength.]
Thus, out of the blue and in the midst of a graphic testimonial about torture, suffering in a state prison, Mouride introduces a spark of spirituality into the wasteland. We learn of lalla Chafia’s healing powers and holy presence. The spiritual aura of the Lalla Chafia, is couched in a language that lifts it to the status of a shrine. Like al-ka’bah in Mecca, Lalla Chafia has been visited by “thousands of pilgrims” since the nation’s independence. The obvious dissonance in the analogy is that Lalla Chafia’s pilgrims are political prisoners, seeking solace and protection from man-made violence, unlike the ka’bah’s pilgrims who are typically seeking guidance and repentance for their sins. In a concise fashion, Mouride smuggles in a politically-loaded footnote in his subtle reconstruction of the nation’s history. He interjects another common theme in Moroccan prison literature from the Lead Years, namely the continuum of state violence and repressive practices from colonial to post-independence régimes.

Source: (Mouride, 2000 :36)

The manifestation of spirituality in the nation’s prisons and secret detention camps from the Years of Lead era does also reflect the instrumentalization of religion in the political arena. Whereas in Tazmamart, the detainees were able to surreptitiously carve
out a spiritual “space” in prison, in an act of resistance and against the will of the carceral system, in Kenitra Central prison, the spiritual icon of Lalla Chafia enjoyed the blessing of the prison authorities. Tolerance or repression of religious and spiritual practice inside the nation’s prisons is determined by the fluctuations and dynamics in the wider political sphere.

A similar thought is echoed by Jaouaad Mdidech in *La Chambre Noire* which chronicles his incarceration at *Derb Moulay Chérif*, a secret detention center in Casablanca where he was detained in 1975. Mdidech was tried in 1977 and received a 22 year-jail sentence for his affiliation with *Ila Al Amam*, a Marxist-leninist “banned” organization which militated for radical reform and was perceived as a substantial threat to the regime. Mdidech recalls the inconvenience of being locked up for days in *la chambre noire*, a dark and small room where he had to compete for sleeping space on the floor with eleven fellow detainees. In the following passage, Mdidech engages in a philosophical debate with himself over the dilemma of joining or not joining his teammates in the Muslim prayer ritual:

« Puis, un jour, je me mis, moi aussi, à prier. J’avais perdu la foi à l’âge de 16 ans et, depuis, la religion me sortait pas les yeux et je n’avais plus mis les pieds dans une mosquée. J’en avais oublié les gestes élémentaires de l’ablution et n’avais retenu dans ma mémoire que la *fatiha* et deux ou trois courtes sourates. Dès le premier jour, dans la chambre noire, j’avais été surpris de me trouver entouré de prisonniers accomplissant régulièrement, cinq fois par jour, leurs prières quotidiennes. Des communistes qui priaient Dieu ! Cela me sembla le comble de l’effondrement des valeurs, de la dégénérescence mentale pour des militants révolutionnaires que d’en arriver là. » (Mdidech, 2002 :128)

[Then, one day, I also started praying. I had lost faith at the age of 16, and ever since, I lost interest in religion and did not ever set foot at a mosque. I had forgotten the basics of ablution and only retained in my memory *Al fatiha* and a few other short suras. From my first day in the dark chamber, I was surprised to find myself surrounded by prisoners who prayed regularly, five times a day, their daily prayers. Communists praying to God! To me, this looked like the highest point in the breakdown of values and in the mental degeneration for revolutionary militants to get to this point.]

After joining his fellow dark room detainees in prayer for one whole week, Middech decided to discontinue, as he felt a misfit among the “community of believers” around him. He was advised by the two inmates sleeping next to him from each side that he needed to pray lest the *Hajs* (this is how the prison guards/torturers wanted to be called!) find out. They warned that he would become the target of their acrimony. Mdidech discovers that the detainees who were sharing the dark room with him were all communists faking piety. He explains that in the reductive logic of the prison system, “failure to pray” is interpreted by the guards as indicative of atheism, and by extension, of communism. In that historical phase of the post-independence nation, the communists were perceived more of a threat to the regime than the Islamists.¹ Fearing

¹ It should be pointed out that the events referred to in Mdidech’s *La Chambre Noire* (2002) happened in the context of the Cold War between the Soviet communist bloc and the Western Capitalist bloc, led by
retribution from the Hajs, and hoping that his dormant faith would be rekindled by faking prayer, Midedech complied with the group in observance of daily prayer for three more days, before he stopped the “masquerade”:

« Mon cirque ne dura que trois jours. La foi perdue ne montra pas le bout de son nez et je n’en pouvais plus. Tout cela sonnait faux. J’avais l’impression d’une mascarade blasphématoire, attentatoire à Dieu et à l’Islam qui demeurent les suprêmes valeurs, en dépit de mon impiété, incrustées dans quelques profondeurs enfouies de mon être. » (Mdidech, 2002:129)

[My masquerade lasted only three days. The lost faith did not show up and I could not take it any longer. All this had a false ring to it. I had the impression I was engaged in a blasphemous masquerade, prejudicial to God and to Islam which remain the supreme values, despite my impiety, embedded in some buried depths of my being.]

This last quote is another illustration of the semantic and epistemological fluctuations that are made possible in the carceral barzakh. Like the tomb-shaped cells of Tazmamart, the dark chamber, is also another interstitial space that offers a pathway to spirituality and deep introspective questionings on the relationship with the divine. Interestingly, the “secret” detention center was located in the midst of a popular “quartier” in Casablanca. Mdidech recalls that there was only a thin barrier separating Derb Moulay Chérif from the surrounding buildings. The sound of the detainees’ agonizing screams during torture sessions is drowned by the sound of people and traffic on the busy street outside. Just like the isthmus of the barzakh where the salt and fresh waters constantly mix and separate, so do the permeable contours of the following semantic categories at Derb Moulay Chérif: freedom/incarceration, communism/Islamism, faith/atheism, compliance/resistance, inside/outside, all seem to be interchangeable, shifting positions, mimicking the ebb and flow the ever mixing and separating waters of the barzakh.

the US. Morocco had opted to make a strategic alliance with the Western bloc, hence the regime’s repression of the communists in the Lead Years.
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