CHAPTER ONE

LOCAL HISTORIES: SHARIFIANISM AND POWER

This chapter attempts to piece up the history of the saint from the scattered stories and scarce documents collected at the shrine of Ben Yeffu and provides a succinct historical account of the maraboutic movement in Morocco. It discusses the problems of the saint Ben Yeffu’s lineage, and analyzes the founding legends of his sainthood. It unveilsthe ideological significance of some constituents of the maraboutic discourse—particularly legends—and expounds how the notion of *baraka* is culturally constructed. Also, the analysis of some decrees and of the tales associated with them contributes to clarifying the ideological function of *baraka* in the maraboutic discourse. The analysis makes it obvious that this discourse constructs its own myths of power that function as an opiate to attract saint-goers to the maraboutic distributing centre and make them believe in its miracles.

A. Historical Origins

Islam came into Morocco around the seventh century to find a deep-seated tradition of magic and witchcraft well-established in “Barbary”—a standard colonial term for North Africa prior to and after the Islamic conquest. Rather than abolish the rites and practices of local culture and impose the Islamic orthodox tradition, the leaders of Islamisation advocated a tolerant Islam able to contain the pagan aspects of local culture. Thus, when maraboutism came into Morocco with the onset of the Islamic conquests, it was given a boost by the traditional culture at the cost of the orthodox tradition. Converts to Islam, the Berbers, discovered in maraboutism a tangible form of worship capable of forming a homogeneous mixture with their deep-rooted pagan beliefs. Later in Moroccan history, maraboutism became so popular and well established that it threatened legitimate political institutions like the Sultan and the Makhzen—take the example of the Zawiya Dila’iya and Zawiya Sharadiya that were destroyed by respective ’Alawite Sultans because they increased in political influence and manifested expectations of political evolution.
Maraboutism is derived from the French word “marabout” which is itself derived from the Arabic word “murabit.” These are ascetic saintly Moslems who gathered disciples, taught them their beliefs, and trained them as mujahids to defend Morocco in the period of Spanish and Portuguese invasions. Their religious lodges were called “ribâts.” They served as watch-posts in strategic areas (like the coast line of the Atlantic) in the face of potential foreign onslaughts by the Christian enemy (Bouzidi, 2000, pp. 38–9).

With the advent of the Berber dynasty of the Almoravids (1073–1174), maraboutic shrines proliferated all over the country. They taught the precepts of the Malikite school of interpretation in Islamic law and religious sciences. When the Sufi trend drifted from the East, these shrines turned into centers for the teaching and accommodation of the Sufis. Zawiyat Abi al-Husain, for instance, was set up on the ruins of Ribât Igharghar (Bouzidi, 2000, p. 38). Shrines became centers of refuge and protection housing the poor segments of the population that could not afford bread and shelter. Those people ate and slept there in compensation for the practice of some Sufi rituals. Shaykhs were also held in veneration and awe for the social role they played. They received alms from the rich and used them in feeding the poor. In moments of economic crisis, marabouts catered for the needs of hungry people. Such altruistic roles of religious leaders ranging from helping Moroccans in situations of need, famine, and epidemics to interceding to the Makhzen to forgive wrongdoers elevated them to higher ranks in society.

Yet, there was a sharp conflict between marabouts and faqihis (religious scholars) following the Malikite school of Sunni jurisprudence. The Almoravids, who were strict adherents to that school of law, ever since its appearance in the Maghreb in the ninth century, allowed the faqihis to control both the administration of justice by the qadis and the work of provincial governors. Faqihis acted as counselors to the rulers, and rejected all mystic tendencies flowing from the Middle East by adopting a restricted legalism (see Mahmoud, n.d., pp. 362–74). Out of the religious opposition to the Islam of the Almoravid jurists, there developed the revolutionary movement of the marabouts that led the jurists to issue a fatwa (formal decision) to burn al-Ghazali’s books: “when al-Ghazali’s books got into Morocco, the commander-in-chief of Moslems [Ali ibn Yusuf (1106–42)] ordered his administrators to burn them, and threatened to shed people’s blood and dispossess them of their wealth if he discovered that they had such books” (al-Murrakushi,