

Christian Infidelity Undone and Interfaith Avowed: Arab Acrobats' Intercultural and Interfaith Marriage

Abdelaziz Tritha¹

Abstract

This paper purports to re-track the itineraries and the trajectories of Arab acrobats, performers in Western theatrical circuses during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through the deployment of one of the most controversial issues, which is interfaith/intercultural marriage. Interfaith marriage was often understood within the restrictive confines of religion. Many Arab travelers and acrobats, namely Muslims, considered marriage to Christian women a veering from the righteous religious path. Ahmed Bin Quasim Al Hajari, a Moroccan ambassador, was subject to the tantalizing offer of a French girl, as he states, "the spirit forbids what is prohibited, and reason adjudicates between them" (Matar, 2008). Despite the affection he showed the French girl, religion interfered as a deterrent. Unlike Ahmed Bin Quasim Al Hajari, who considered his love for the French girl a transient satanic impulse, Many Arab acrobats during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries married Western women. Ali Shribb, a Moroccan acrobat managed by Abdullah Ben Boujemaa, developed an amorous relationship with an Australian girl. Hassan Ben Ali, a famous Moroccan acrobat, married an American girl. This is to argue against Lewis's allegation, which accuses Muslims of splitting the world into two contentious religious polarities (Islam vs Christianity).

Keywords: Interfaith, Intercultural, Christian, Muslim

¹ Hassan 1 University, Morocco
Email: trithaabdellaziz@yahoo.fr

Publication Details:

Article Received: April 1, 2026

Article Revised: June 25, 2026

Article Published: June 30, 2026

Recommended citation in APA:

Tritha, A. (2026). Christian infidelity undone and interfaith avowed: Arab acrobats' intercultural and interfaith marriage. *International Review of Literary Studies*, 8(1), 1–17. <https://irlsjournal.com/index.php/Irls>
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22172464>

Published by Licensee MARS Publishers. Copyright: © the author(s). This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Introduction

This article purports to examine secular encounters between Arab Muslim acrobats and Western Christians through unraveling the facades of intercultural and interfaith marriages. It also aims to show how evasive postulations of Christian infidelity are undone in some Arab acrobats' accounts, which are under scrutiny. A digression into the current seething debates on both intercultural and interfaith marriage is significantly useful in tracing the historical sediments and the ongoing impacts. With the growing, dizzying mobility of Muslims towards Western shores and the increasing virtual affiliations spurred by the rapid pace of technological development, cross-cultural engagement and fertilization have become increasingly pressing. Thanks to the growing movement of human capital Eastward and Westward, the routes/roots of conjugal kinship between couples of different creeds and cultural backgrounds are continually being solidified. In our multicultural landscape teeming with identities in excess, hybridized forms and religious and cultural criss-crossing seem to be the vogue of today. The challenge that persists today stems from the deeply seated doctrine of Islamic theology. Whereas Muslim men are allowed to marry Christian women because they are considered as women of the book, Muslim women are only allowed to marry men from the same Islamic creed. This thorny issue spans a long, ancient history and the ongoing flow of human mobility in different corners.

This article seeks to highlight the giant role played by Arab acrobats in reversing the binary religious demarcations between the claimed Christian infidels and the Muslims righteous believers through the deployment of narratives of intercultural and interfaith marriages. It purports to examine how Arab acrobats forged itineraries of alter(native) discourses of difference beyond the schismatic thought of religious polarization. The emphasis here is on surveying these conjugal narratives of fact, which have long been kept hidden in plain sight, to debunk Bernard Lewis' postulation that Arabs did not trespass the threshold of their curatorial land and the circumvention of their well-delimited polity to know the Christian Other. I argue that Arabs, right before and after the Crusades, were pioneers in establishing roots/routes of alliances with the Christian world. Not only were they keen on discovering the Christian land, but they were also active participants in building the Christian society through intercultural and interfaith marriage.

This article endeavors to rewrite Arabs' encounters with the West by highlighting features of engagement, religious and cultural contact beyond antagonism and animosity. It aims at debunking both Lewis's belated Orientalist predications and the Islamic theological injunctions. Since intercultural and interfaith marriage represents the kernel of this article, a set of skeptical concerns proves basic: to what extent do Arab acrobats fashion an alternative discourse of difference through intercultural and interfaith marriage? How could they contribute to the ventilation of Islamic theological thought? Starting from these narratives of fact, how is the binary orthodoxy of Christian vs Muslim undone? To address these interrogations, this article shall survey a set of historical encounters and debunk Bernard Lewis's claim. It shall also foreground facades of intercultural and interfaith fertilization beyond religious acrimony.

Methodology

This article sets out to follow a methodological approach that draws demarcatory lines between elitist and popular sources. In the micro-historicist lingo, small narratives of fact, sporadic individual experiences and neglected accounts challenge the canonical stories' formalities and the grand-narratives' aesthetics. Microhistory is a branch of historical studies that focuses on the small narratives and the intricacies of the lives of unknown, ordinary individuals. This sub-discipline of historical examination endeavors to recapture the voices of the past and therefore to recreate their contributions to the writing of history.

For microhistorians, the makers of history are not necessarily "great men" but rather little people, such as "charlatan distiller, an accused witch and peasants who had disturbing visions" (Edward Muir & Guido Ruggiero (eds), 1991, p x). In sum, microhistory highlights the complex itineraries of ordinary people who, through the filter of their cultural and professional contributions, help reconsider the "verticality" of history as imposed from above. In the spirit of this microhistoricist approximation, cases of interfaith and intercultural marriage are brought to the surface as forgotten narratives of fact and testimonies of religious engagements. Historical archival records of both intercultural and interfaith marriage do highlight the forgotten façade of interreligious and

intercultural encounters. These narratives showcase how these subaltern voices, which have long been kept as aesthetic archival records. In this vein, the analysis of intercultural and interfaith marriage falls within the scope of a micro-historicist prism since the examined stories and narratives are sporadic and neglected historical documents, unlike canonical texts, which are exhaustively scrutinized.

I) Beyond Christian Infidelity: Religious and Cultural Encounters Reconsidered

Bernard Lewis, a well-established figure and authority on Muslim/Christian encounters. Bernard Lewis's postulation is predicated on the examination of Muslims' discovery of Europe, extending from the sixth century up to the nineteenth century. Lewis's vehement concern with the scrutiny of Islamic history allotted him the prerogative of being a well-established, in fact, Orientalist authority on Islam. In this vein, Bernard Lewis claims:

In the Muslims' world view, the basic division of mankind is into the House of Islam (Dar-al-Islam) and the House of War (Dar-al-Harb). The one consists of all those countries where the law of Islam prevails, that is to say, broadly, the Muslim empire; the latter is the rest of the world. (Lewis, 1982, 60).

Lewis's fevered commitment to the orientalist logos, as adamantly consolidated by his ancestors, entrenches walls and contentious frontiers between the House of War and the House of Islam. The two geo-religious territories are sealed off and beleaguered with no religious or fluid cultural crossover. He ascribes the split of the world into two antagonistic poles to Muslims' religious blindness. Euro-Christians must have one sole religious referential; it is Islam as the only rightful religion. Bernard Lewis, as obedient to the Orientalist inimical prism, alleges that the dominance of Islam precludes the presence of any other religious polity outside its sphere. Bernard Lewis confirms his radicalized instigation of theological contestations and disseminates the fixed Orientalist tropes.

Lewis's bedrock of essentialism and religious fervor entails the fact that whoever has a religious practice beyond Islam is deemed as infidel (Kafir). Lewis's dichotomous discourse, which is rested on religious bifurcation of Islam vs Christianity, is further consolidated by his examination of Muslims' travel to the West. In his book *Muslim Discovery of Europe* (1982), Bernard Lewis alleges that Muslim travelers, right after the Crusades, showed no inherent inquisitiveness and curiosity to know the intricacies of the infidel Other. Muslim travelers were rather blinded by their parochial and curatorial vision, showing their triumph and valor. He further claims that this absence of inquisitiveness is due to the broad generalizations and the vague conclusions that Muslims formulated about a forlorn Occident. In this sense, he stresses that:

The Muslim had no comparable concern with Christian Europe. His religion was born in Arabia; his prophet was an Arab; his scriptures were in Arabic; and his places of pilgrimage, Mecca and Medina, were safely in Muslim lands. Nor was there much else to attract Muslims to Europe (Lewis, 1982, p. 8)

Bernard Lewis shrouds Muslims' curiosity to investigate the Occidental realm. He also entrenches fences to inhibit cultural fluidity and momentum between the Muslim and Occidental worlds. Unable to ventilate their thought and therefore explore the Occidental world beyond the confines of their land, Muslims were but riveted to their geographical lot. Bernard Lewis stresses the incapability of Muslims to trespass the threshold of their land as there was nothing available to arouse their interest. Such a lack of inquisitiveness found its best explanation in the fact that Muslims were more attached to their sacrosanct territory, where they lived in communion and spiritual contentment.

To better foreground this, a closer look at some historical junctures when Arab travelers ventured to the other secular West is crucial. Accounts of the seventeenth century, such as Ahmed Bin Quasim Al Hajari's *Nasr al-din 'ala al l-Qawm al-kafirin* (1611-1613) (helping the religion (Islam) against the disbelievers; Translation is mine), were overt declarations to vituperate Westerners for the falsity of their religion and condemn them for their derailment from the righteous religious path. On the contrary, Arab travels during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries registered a clear shift towards embracing the Christian Other and acknowledging his technological superiority. I argue that these accounts are contoured by the national, geographical, and historical dimensions akin to these journeys.

An insight into the Muslim/Christian encounters, though historical elision has marked most of Muslims' accounts on the Western Other, prompts us towards a series of skeptical questions about the validity of the Self/Other hermetic closure. No wonder, and throughout history, Muslims' contribution to the formulation of both Eastern and Western subjectivity, investigation of the Western world, and cultural contact with the Western Other have been obviously remarkable. Their writings supplied and enriched Western literary scholarship. The seminal stages of cultural and political rendezvous, though judged as fledgling, could have been inferred from references to the glorious days of Muslims just prior to the ninth century. From that century onwards, cultural and political relations with Europe were deepened through translation and the proliferation of travel and spy embassies. Since then, the image of Europe was clear. For them, it was composed of three regions: Sakalib, Rome, and the Byzantines and the French, along with the Normans" (Al Kilani, 2002, p. 353). With these long standing historical bonds, it is thoroughly evident that the thriving means of interaction with Europe and the West could be traced back to ancient times.

Muslims' travels to the West have always been stimulated by zeal and vehemence for Occidental discovery and investigation. Withstanding the adamantly maintained tropes of subordination and exclusion from the main core of Euro-Christian traveling repertoire, Muslims and Arabs were already pioneering agents and representatives of their home countries. Concurrently, Western historiography has alleged that "early modern travels" (Matar, 2003, p. 1) chronicling was a "Euro-Christian" (Matar, 2003, p. 1) exclusivity and state of affair. Completely blinded by their self-aggrandizement and their 'puritan' philosophies, Western historians regarded Muslims' voyages as minimal and disproportionate compared to the momentum of their travel writings. All that emanates from the Islamic world as traveling literature is envisioned as an 'anomaly', such is the case in point of a renowned Moroccan Muslim traveler, Ahmed Ibn Qassim Al Hajari, who traveled to different corners of the globe, namely France and Holland. His experience of journeying flabbergasted a Dutchman who cynically stated: "We are amazed at you; you know languages, read books, and have traveled in the cities and countries of the world, and yet you are a Muslim!" (Matar, 2003, p. 12). The rhetoric of superiority and inflation is all along manifested in this quotation to downscale Muslims' contribution to the reification of Arrihla as a self-contained genre.

In the realm of orientalist modes of representation, a counter-stereotypical discourse emerges that seeks to subvert, modify, and resist homogenized views of the Orient. Edward Said has shown the extent to which the Orient is mythologically constructed against a homogenized background that denies cultural diversity and heterogeneity. Ahmed Bin Quasim Al Hajari's travel, Nasir Din Aala al Qawm Kafirin ((helping the religion (Islam) against the disbelievers; Translation is mine) (1611-1613) (Al Hajari, 2004) initiates Muslims' discourse of difference through the reversal of Spanish Orientalism, based on the predication that the Muslims were a constant threat. His deep knowledge of both Catholicism and Islam enabled him, at the aesthetic level of his travel, to adopt a drama-like dialogue that sets the stage for both the self and the other in cultural negotiations. His main critical vision lies in the denunciation of Spanish stereotypes that curtailed Muslims to mere proponents of religious fervor. Those clichés date back to the Renaissance era, where Spanish Catholicism was fostered against the permanent menace of Islam. Ahmed Ibn Quassim's Al Hajari's vision was not to subvert the Spanish orientalist paradigms as a limited act in itself to foster Occidental discourse; he went beyond both the orientalist and the occidentalist visions. His main critical focus was on foregrounding Christian European and Islamic histories as enmeshed in political struggle ever since the fall of Granada in 1492. of cultural exploration and an arena under an Arab's critical observation and commentaries. His account is profuse with instances that foreground degrees of cultural cross-over between the Islamic Self and the Christian Other. This is to draw a clear distinction between Orientalist postulations that negate Muslims' keenness to establish alliances with infidels and the Islamic theological discourse that allows marriage to Christian women, as they belong to "people of the Book".

II) From lack of Inquisitiveness to Interfaith and intercultural Marriage

The issue of interfaith marriage, as best configured in the conjugal cohabitation of couples embracing divergent creeds, raised controversial debates and seething contentions. Arab visitors of Western countries, be they official envoys or acrobatic crews, were subject to Western females'

tantalizing offers. At a time when Western host countries were preferred destinations for seeking knowledge, technological innovations, novel military ammunition, or ransom for captives, Arab travelers and ambassadors were infatuated with Western beauty and therefore developed amorous relations with Western women. Variations across historical periods could be considered clues to Arab travelers' engagement with Western women.

Since interfaith marriage was often construed under the restrictive frames of religion, Many Arab travelers, merchants, and acrobats, at least those who were Muslims, considered marrying a Christian woman as a stark infringement of Islamic codes and maxims. Ahmed Bin Quasim Al Hajari, for instance, was under the gaze of a coquettish French girl. In his sojourn in France, Bin Quasim affirmed:

Love grew between us so much that I was distraught by it....Then she [returned and] asked me whether I had a wife in my country. I said to her, "I do."She said, "And do you marry more than one wife?" "It is permissible in our religion," I said to her. Then she said, "Do you have children?" "I do," I said. And I said to myself: when she hears this, her love [mahabba] will diminish. But it did not at all (Matar, 2009, p. 106)

Despite the seeds of love that blossomed in Bin Quasim's and the French girl's hearts, signs of infuriation and distress were dominating feelings that accompanied Bin Quasim's hazy attitudes. The French girl flirtatiously approached Bin Quasim and implicitly asked him about the possibility of polygamy. The context was propitious for concluding that an affective relationship, with happy communion and therefore a consented marriage, existed; however, Bin Quasim expressed his mutiny due to the theological injunctions as dictated by Muslim Jurists. He went so far as to acknowledge that his infatuation with the French girl was no more than a satanic thrust that "helps her, but the spirit forbids what is prohibited, and reason adjudicates between them" (Matar, 2009, p. 15). Bin Quasim confessed that Islamic reason averted him from veering from the righteous path.

In a vibrant temporal juncture, such was the time frame of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the momentum of mobility reached its acme, Arab acrobats sailed in Western shores and established intriguing and interesting love kinships with Western females. Not all those relationships culminated in happy, festive weddings, but many intercultural relationships ended in heartbreak, leaving deeper cracks in the couples' hearts. In that generic context of show business and consumerist economy based on theatrical performances and circus exhibitions, the circulating stereotypes were those that capitalized on the Oriental man as a lascivious being in quest of the white body to gratify his sexual impulses. When Arab acrobats became renowned ethnic figures in American circuses and fairs, "many people would conflate the desert sheik into a more sexualized, generically Eastern man who particularly sought out white women" (Nance, 2009, p. 260). The aesthetics of representation curtailed Arab acrobats to hedonistic beings.

The revised version of that Orientalist paradigm could be traced in Oriental acrobats' circuits not as seekers of sexual desire but as mediators of love and affection. The marvelous account of Ali Shribb was an amorous story of many turns and returns. Under the management of Abdulah Ben Boujemaa, a famous Moroccan acrobat from Tangier, Ali Shribb struck an immediate response to the attention of his peers. The Sunday Times, a Perth-based newspaper in Australia, brought him from the fringe of invisibility to the center as a big headline: The Amorous Arab, A Kalgoorlie Maid, who mashed the Moor.

With an interventionist and officious jargon of triumphalism and grandeur, the columnist of the Sunday Times gave a preamble to Ali's story:

The imported troupe of Arabs, brown-coloured bucks from Tangier, the suburbs of the capital of Morocco, and from the fringe of the desert in that country, recently showing at Perth and Kalyoorlie under the style and the title of Abdullah's Arabs were merry men. Travel had served to knock off the rough edges of native semi-civilization and had modernized the men to a condition of men-about-town. Gay dogs, Romeos in truth, some of the younger of the chocolate-complexioned tumblers proved themselves while they were in W.A. The Arab boy left Kalgoorlie hopelessly in love with a peroxided princess of an up-town bar, and that fact serves as the preamble to this storeyette of this unrequited affection (Sunday Times, 1909, p. 7).

Moroccan acrobats who visited Kayroolie at Perth, Australia, were portrayed on the pedestal of color and physical complexity. They were also ranked as peripheral and desert dwellers in need of modernization and urbanization to polish their unrefined rustic behaviors. That uneven stereotypical depiction had at its genesis the officious Orientalist categorization that entrenched walls between the civilized and the barbaric. The “semi-civilization”, which the author coined to portray native acrobats, had at its back the colonial load and xenophobic charge that demarcated the full-fledged civilization from the pseudo-one. That bifurcated logic of thinking held that even the process of modernization could not instill in native acrobats the principles of “townness” but would instead result in a state of semi-cultivation.

The gist of Ali Shribb’s story could be summarized in the letter he sent to the Australian girl, who was working as a waitress in a pub. While Ali was looking to “quench his thirst”, he peeped out from the hotel’s balcony on Hannan Street and was beguiled by a young Australian girl whose beauty enchanted Ali’s psyche. The Australian beauty fell in love with Ali as overtly shown “yes, she answered him, she liked him; her preference always being for dark men, being a blooming blond herself” (Sunday Times, 1909, p. 7). The reciprocal love neutralized the recurrent premise of Christian infidelity and austere xenophobia. All expressions of Mahabba (affection) were embedded in Ali Shribb’s letter. Though signs of a happy marriage were never shown in the reunion of the amorous couple, there were features of consensus between a Muslim and a Christian.

Excerpts from the letter :-
 “My Own Dearest Darling Dolly—
 We did have a fine trip home from
 Australia. I was thinking of you
 all the time, and you don't know
 lovey how much I mush (miss)
 you. I wish I was with you now
 love, Dolly, as I love you very
 mush indeed. I wish that you were
 here with me in my country. I do
 feel very miserebal without you my
 lovey. Now love I am hundreds
 and thousands of miles away far
 from you, but as much far as I be
 I will never forget you my lov
 Dolly. Write as sune as you get
 this lettr. I shall be very, very
 plected to hear from my love. I
 hope the team will soon go travel
 again so as we could go out over
 sea to Australia again so I could
 see you my love once moar. I
 will keep writing to you always
 until I came to your arm again, as
 you are the only girl I ever loved
 true in all my life. With remem-
 berers to your cobbors B— and
 E—, and with all my best love
 and visis to you my darlin, I am
 your loving sweetheart for ever
 and ever until I die, your .tru
 sweetheart.
 x x x x
 ALL.”

Figure 1. Ali Shribb’s letter to the Australian girl

In addition to the marvelous account of Ali Shribb, parallel stories of interfaith marriage were cases of an affectionate discourse predicated much more on love than on tenuous religious doctrines. Marie Hart, a young English girl from Birmingham, married Mohammed ben Mohammed, a renowned member of Ben Achmet’s troupe of acrobatics. While he was touring in Budapest, he met Sallie Hart, Marie’s sister, and was soon introduced to the little Mary who bewildered his thoughts. In the course of time, Mohammed Ben Mohammed went back to Birmingham and secured an apartment next to Marie Hart’s. After eight years of dating, they frequently met, as love fueled their hearts, and consequently decided to embark on their conjugal journey.

Inasmuch as the marriage ceremony was a queer one, gathering true Mohammadans and Christians alike, the celebratory festivities were also dynamics of cultural assimilation and acculturation. The wedding took place at the Registry Office in Birmingham, where Arabs, wearing their fezzes, added to the occasion. The registry venue included “about thirty Arabs clad in their flowing white robes and gaily decorated costumes. The bridegroom was in English attire”(Albuquerque Journal, 1908, p. 9). Because the Christian and Islamic creeds were coexisting

in a serene communion, the trope of Muslims' abstinence from marrying Christian women was neutralized. Against Michael Suleiman's premise, which bears out that "Arabs in America formed their own residential colonies.... Pointing out the disadvantage of marrying an American girl" (Suleiman, 1999, p. 6), Marie Hart and Mohammed Ben Mohammed proved cases that celebrated religious difference beyond the confines of fervor and bigotry. The rhetoric of white cultural supremacy as a racialized discourse of otherness dissolved due to the presence of Arabs with their fezzes, marking their Oriental cultural exclusivity. As the bridegroom wore English attire, he retained his local cultural heritage through the Fez that adorned his head.

Hassan Ben Ali, a renowned Moroccan acrobat, married an American woman. He was a man of marvelous stories and fascinating accounts regarding the distances he crossed and the troupes of acrobats he recruited in various Western circuses. Though scarce data was archived about the peripety contouring his marital life, Sie Hassan Ben Ali was referred to as having married Christina Raab, the daughter of Christian Raab. As there was neither a written interview nor a firm declaration by Sie Hassan Ben Ali regarding his marriage, George Hamid, his rival, stated in his book that while he was touring American circuses, he heard of Hassan Ben Ali's notoriety. As Curiosity led him to discover the marvels of Hassan Ben Ali, he met Christina Raab. Later on, George Hamid gently approached Christina Raab to ask for Hassan Ben Ali's expertise, and she then announced that her husband had already died. What could be inferred was that Christina was Ben Ali's wife.

Hassan Ben Ali's betrothal to Christina was evidenced by her arrival in Tangier to request her husband's body and inheritance. As soon as she reached Tangier, she met three doctors who witnessed the death of her husband and then escorted her to her husband's grave:

They led her into the desert and showed her a grave which they claimed was his. Mrs. Ben Ali demanded that they open the grave and permit her to identify the remains, but her demand was refused. Even after offering them 5000\$, she was not permitted to exhume the body (Dayton Daily News 1914, 30)

Interestingly, the scene revealed signs of fidelity as it chronicled Christina Raab's endeavors as a surrogate for her husband. The tenuous religious barricades did not hamper her from exhuming the body of her Mohammadan. The incident was very telling in the sense that it refashioned the politics of racial stratification as it invalidated the ethos of fear and anxiety. Since the dominant tradition was that white American women "intermarriage between Anglo-Saxons and others in fear of creating a "degenerate" or "mongrel" majority in the United States" (Nance, 2009, p. 223), Christina Ben Ali offered a corrective to that logic of cultural contamination and religious animosity.

The issue of interfaith marriage was a common feature contouring the lives of Arab performers and entertainers in Western theatrical stages. Ali Hassani, a renowned tumbler and pyramid builder, went to Britain in 1950 and established alliances with various British performers. Gradually, his expertise among Billy Smart's acrobatic crew increased. It was in Britain that his love story burgeoned when he met Tamara Polakovs while touring in British circuses. Tamara Polakovs, the daughter of Nicolai Polakovs, a famous acrobat in Britain, had long been practicing acrobatics before Ali Hassani set foot in Britain. Tamara was born in 1920 in Riga, Poland. She inherited her father's dexterity in acrobatics and then set out on a successful professional career as both an acrobat and a trapeze artist (The Guardian, Aug 11, 1980).

In the course of time, when Ali Hassani gained wide fame with Billy Smart's enterprise and polished up his acrobatic knack, he got to know Tamara Polakovs. Her itinerary as an acrobat was of many turns as she confessed that "I always went off and worked in other circuses. My dad always came and got me back. We fought a lot." (The Guardian, Aug 11, 1980). Her rebelliousness and mutiny against parental 'custody' made of her a chivalric acrobatic personality. Since she was a descendant of a Jewish family, marriage to Ali Hassani was repugnantly declined, especially by her father. The alibi advanced in that sense was that Ali's refusal was attributed more to his Arabian origin and Islamic creed than to his acrobatic skill. Tamara gave even a more slippery motif behind her parents' objection when she confirmed that "Ali started tumbling in a market square in Marrakech, it was really a form of begging, you see." (The Guardian, Aug 11, 1980).

The inculcated stereotype of Arab acrobats as hedonistic beings and atavistic performers was still looming over the mind of Tamara's parents. They dwarfed Ali's inspiring career to a mere

amateurish tumbler and money-seeker. Against her parents' will, she betrothed Ali Hassani and therefore established a family eager, like her, for acrobatic expertise. Tamara reconsidered the defiled image of Arab acrobats as snake charmers and fringe dwellers. Her attitudes towards Ali Hassani's origin were cases of cultural fertilization and criss-crossing as she revealed:

My husband taught me about Moroccan culture and customs, including dignity and the importance of family. We are all very close and we sit down to meals together. Of course, I miss being part of the act, but my daughter has taken my place. She cooks and makes all of the 10 different costumes for the troupe. (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Tue, Jan 22, 1974, 20)

As plainly articulated in Tamara's words, the Moroccan cultural assets were neither discarded nor merely considered as rustic tributes of a forlorn civilization. Ali Hassani, as recurrently abhorred by Tamara's father, ingrained in his wife's and daughter's minds the principles of dignity and family cohesion. In sum, Ali Hassani and Tamara, driven by love, overcame Christian-Islamic antagonism and thus mitigated the restive encounter between Western and Eastern subjects.



Figure 2. Tamara Polakovs, Ali Hassani's Wife, at the Circus Hassani, picture taken by Hamilton Weat (Monday, August 11, 1980).

Interfaith marriage, as nurtured by a reconciliatory compromise of two couples, flourished in Western circles as a marker of religious and cultural fertilization. Hadj Tahar, a Moroccan acrobat, furrowed his trajectory as a nomadic cultural agent in various Western circuses and fairs. Many references to his thrilling romances were archived and documented by Western archival newspapers. Hadj Tahar's marital life was markedly different from that of his peers, the acrobats, marked by many twists and turns, sometimes resulting in an unhappy conjugal life and a fractured family.

One of the striking testimonies documenting Hadj Tahar's engagement with Western femininity could be traced back to his betrothal to Julia Gale, or Julia Doyle, by her maiden name. As he was immersed in his show business, he met Julia Gale, who was originally from Ireland and had migrated to the United States. As their marriage was officially documented, Gale traveled with Hadj Tahar until she was left alone with her baby girl, May (The San Francisco Call, January, 23, 1899). Julia Gale sued Hadj Tahar in court after being unable to care for his daughter, May. Judge Daly, from New York, decided that the father was not a proper custodian (The San Francisco Call, January 23, 1899) and therefore Hadj Tahar's daughter, May, was placed in the custody of her aunt, Josie, Julia Gales' sister. At the back of that thrilling incident, there lay a lack of cultural and religious consanguinity between Hadj Tahar and Julia Gale.

Another stimulating narrative of betrothal was Hadj Tahar's marriage to Julia Bekesy, a Hungarian actress. The details of the encounter between an Oriental man and a white Western girl were as much telling as Julia Doyle's ones. While Hadj Tahar was 76 years old, Julia Bekesey was 24 years old (The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, September 9, 1928). After a couple of years of living in communion with his wife, a sudden mishap befell their amorous relationship. Hadj Tahar puts it clearly:

Now, after taking all I have, she has thrown me into jail to get from me money I do not possess. Mrs. Tahar, according to her husband, found men more attractive than himself after a few years of

marriage. They lived at 62 Lynbrook Ave at the time she started a separation suit in the Supreme Court last October (The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, September, 9, 1928)

Julia Bekesy, driven by her excessive thrust to accumulate wealth, undermined Hadj Tahar's familial coziness. The discursive strategies of arresting the role of Sheik to a mere lascivious and lustful being were reversed in the sense that Hadj Tahar's main purpose was to have a family, whereas Julia Bekesy turned into a money-monger. She was more driven by her frivolous impulses to satiate her whims than by her keenness to marry an Oriental Sheik and lead a decent life. Sheik Hadj Tahar, as often referred to, explained elsewhere that Julia Bekesy manifested her overt rapacity and "took an apartment in the Bronx. He declared that he interceded with her to come back, but she refused" (The Philadelphia Inquirer, Sept 1, 1928, 1). Such an incident brought about nefarious repercussions on the notoriety of Hadj Tahar as a well-known Arabian acrobat. One of which was his imprisonment upon being unable to pay the alimony for his wife.

An intriguing facade of a discourse predicated on Othering found its best expressions in the narrative of Clara Casey, a young Manchester girl, aged 17, who married Mohammed Ben Belkasem, a Moroccan Acrobat. Marriage took place in a Liverpool Mosque on the thirteenth of March (Geelong Advertiser, Saturday 8 July 1905, 7). Under the consent of Billal Quilliam, and in "the absence of Sheik Abdullah Quilliam Bey Effendi, the Head of the Moslems in the British Island in Constantinople" (Geelong Advertiser, Saturday 8 July 1905, 7), marriage took place according to the Mohammadan rituals. As marriage was consummated, Clara moved with Mohammed Ben Belkasem to Tangier. The British newspapers considered that act as either an elopement or kidnap.

The perils of the harem, where Clara was claimed to live with her husband, distraught her already agitated feelings and propelled her to write a letter to British authorities laying bare the peripety of her current marital life:

I wish I were in England again. I am quite miserable and lonely here, and it makes me feel it more when I see how Mr. Abdullah treats his wife and the -way Mohammed treats me. "There is. a great difference. He is always hitting me, and he laughs at me now he has got me here, and tells me I will never see you again; that I shall live and die here. "Dear Mother, I hope and trust to God I Will soon be able to return to England again. What a fool I have been to give myself to this man. (Australian Star, Saturday, 8 July 1905, p: 7).

Identical to the epistolary genre of captivity narratives, where the ordeal and the tribulations of the captivated are big headlines, Clara Casey disclosed her abhorrence of the harem's sentinels, at least as she constructed them, and claimed injustice and cruelty on the part of her husband. Clara Casey constructed the fetishes of harem as a secluded space, where polygamy was the dominant tradition among ruler, as there was no reference to the wives among whom she was living. She built on the Orientalist premises which qualified every Oriental house as a harem. A repertoire of images brewing over to imaginatively construct the Orient as teeming with "harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on" (Said 1979, 190). Nothing evidenced Clara Casey's life in the harem except the teasing headlines of newspapers, among which the Australian Star highlighted "Life in a Harem, Experience of a Moor's English bride".

Many elements proved the fragmentariness of Clara Casey's story and undermined its consistency. The alibi of elopement or kidnap, often referred to by British newspapers, was demystified through the declaration of Billal Quilliam Bey that marriage "was made plain to both parties that the ceremony was not a marriage according to English or Christian law" (Australian Star, Saturday 8 July 1905, 7). Despite the tendency of British newspapers to capitalize on Clara Casey's predicament and therefore consider Mohammed Ben Belkasem as a rustic, misogynist and uncultivated husband, that proclivity failed to achieve the coherence of narrativity. Clara Casey, with the consent of her parents, was converted to Islam and embraced Mohammadanism (Australian Star, Saturday 8 July 1905, 7).

Many archival sources documented the incident of Mohammed Belkasem with the British consulate in Tangier. As marriage was considered a runaway, the British Embassy called upon Mohamed ben Belkasem to bring Clara Back home. The tension was heightened until "the moor drew a revolver on the acting Consul, but he was prevented from firing by Mr Morillo. The Moor finally escaped and took refuge in a sanctuary" (The Inter Ocean, Jun 11, 1905, 13). Mohammed Ben

Belkasem challenged the British authorities by disclosing his legitimate marriage to Clara and refusing to comply with the law's prescriptions. Nothing hampered Mohammed Ben Belkasem from saving his conjugal relationship.

In spite of the connivance machinated against Mohammed Belkasem to render his amorous story a hollow one, he steadfastly curbed the British authorities and celebrated the triumph of his love adventure. A triumph that was fostered by his wife, Clara Casey, who, even though she claimed to have been tortured, lamented her miserable loneliness as she wanted to join her husband anew. She, later on, declared, "I am very sorry that the trouble with my husband ever arose. In fact, I wish I were back with him now" (Australian Star, 22 July 1905, 2). Her story was enigmatic inasmuch as it unfolded many slippages which reflected Clara Casey's derangement. Between the anxiety of avowing her love and the fear of engaging with the Moorish culture, she failed to articulate her stance beyond her parents' doctrinaire instructions. That could be buttressed by her firm declaration:

I knew at the time of my marriage that Ben Cassem had another wife. I wrote to my mother in a hasty moment, because Ben Cassem struck me. If I had not done this, he would not be in custody now, and I should be with him (The Buffalo Sunday Morning News, 1905, 2)

Since Clara Casey accepted the Mohammadan right in polygamy, she was not then acquitted of the faulty initiative she took. Her hasty attitudes undermined the prospect of a serene conjugal life. In Sum, though the British Newspapers considered the marriage of Ben Belkasem and Clara Casey an infringement of the cultural walls separating the Western and Eastern worlds, the story never achieved internal solidity, as Clara clung to her husband and acquiesced in the repercussions of the miserable mishap.

Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, many Arab acrobats entered in relationships with Western women, culminating, and most often, in marriages. Ahmed Ben Ali Zinati, originally from Tangier, spent his whole career traveling between and sojourning in Western circuses. In 1949, when Tangier was still under the sovereignty of the triangular colonial forces, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, Ahmed Ben Ali Zinati was soon noticed as a young acrobatic figure. Due to "his acrobatic abilities combined with his size and strength, he soon became an impressive acrobat" (www.circopedia.org).



Figure 3. Ali Zinati and His wife, Giulia Ferrari, an Italian performer from Varese, Italy.

While he was performing with the Ifni Sahara troupe, Ben Ali's acrobatic crew, in Teatro Smeraldo, in Milan, with the Circo-Revista Palmiri, he met Giulia Ferrari, with whom he fell in love. Later on, Giulia Ferrari left her family and joined Ahmed Ben Ali Zinati as a showgirl and elephants' rider. He married her according to the Islamic rituals in Come, Italy (Telhine, 2013, p. 40). Over time, he retired and dedicated his whole life to his children, Roberto, Zohra, Fatima, and Karim. The mundane clichés of racial abhorrence and threat were neutralized in the case of Ahmed Ben Ali Zinati as seeds of mahabba (affection) and communion were sown in both Ahmed's and Giulia's Hearts. Neither her Christian fervor to preserve her creed nor his Islamic injunctions to marry a girl of his own religion were hindrances in front of their amorous adventure. Their affectionate relationship demystified the premise based on the fact that Muslims' engagement with Western women was often restricted by the "concept of Haram, which dominated the Muslim visitors from the very start" (Matar,

2009, p. 107). In sum, Ahmed Ben Ali Zinati and Giulia Ferrari transcended the rhetoric of Christian/Islamic antagonism and therefore established ties of cultural coexistence.

George Hamid, the most renowned Arab acrobat, mentioned earlier, married Elizabeth Raab (often referred to as Bess), an American girl from New Jersey. Elizabeth Raab used to function as a secretary of Hassan Ben Ali, who was considered at that time as a fierce competitor and robust rival of George Hamid (*The Philadelphia Inquirer* 1971, 34). While Hassan Ben Ali was earnestly striving to ripen Elizabeth Raab's expertise in acrobatics, George Hamid was contriving to win her heart. She soon became George Hamid's fellow in acrobatic shows. Later, they married in 1915.

Faithful to the racial and Orientalist castigation of Arab societies as Bedouin dwellers, Elizabeth Raab's family objected to Elizabeth's and George's marriage. The alibi advanced by her family could be summarized in George's conversation with Christina Ben Ali and Bess, his future wife:

She called from the next room, "Bessie, bring me a route file." A younger girl appeared not quite so tall, a little plumper, with a good-looking, impudent face. "Bess" said Mrs Ben Ali, "I would like to present Mr. Hamid. My sister, Bess." With a curt, "how do you do", she lifted her chin, marching out of the room. "She does not like Arabs," Ben Ali's widow explained. "I am not an Arab, I am Lebanese." "You are an acrobat. As far as she is concerned, you are an Arab" (Hamid, 2004, p. 121)

Features of racial demarcation between Arabs and the white race were iterated in Bess's words as her grandeur and pomposity were displayed. With her resentment and antipathy towards Arabs, as a different sect, Bess overtly gave free rein to her nasty generalizations. Since "The culture of segregation and racial social separation was so entrenched in the United States" (Nance 2014, 168), Bess could not have averted siding with that dominant logos. At the genesis of that advanced superiority, there lay the Orientalist premises with which "theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century" (Said 1979, 206). The uneven cultural and racial inequality found its best iteration in Bess's words.

Forms of racialization, to which conflated hostile declarations, were characteristics of both Bess, as a Western female, and George Hamid as an Easterner. To win the trust of Bess's family, George Hamid tended to define himself as a Lebanese, and not as an Arab. For both Christina Ben Ali and Bess, to be an acrobat was synonymous with being an Arab. Though George Hamid deployed his disguised persona as a distinct Eastern acrobat, he failed to withstand Bess's inculcated prejudices about Arabs. Even the family treated George Hamid contemptuously and derogatively. In one of his souvenirs, he recalled the day he went with Bessie to her father's house:

You have been banned. Mother does not think you are the right person. That is a hot one. Why not? She lowered her eyes. Mother says I am a Jersey City aristocracy and you are just an Arab. I am Lebanese, I insisted. "Arab, Syrian, and Lebanese— they are all the same to her (Hamid, 2004, p. 128).

The fixed racial taxonomy of Bess's mother, as it conflated Arabs in one rubric, drew demarcatory lines between the aristocratic and the Bedouin. George Hamid's conjugal life, which began with his spouse's skepticism, lasted long and culminated in the birth of their son, George Hamid Junior. Both George Hamid and Bess were raised in Christian families. In fine, George Hamid and Bess, unlike most other Arab acrobats, who were Muslim, did not face controversies related to religious beliefs but rather endured clashes over cultural and racial belonging and social positions.



Figure 4. George Hamid with Bess (Elizabeth Raab), Christina Ben Ali's Sister, in their early days of marriage, 1914.

Along the same trajectory of interfaith betrothal, another interesting account captured the attention of the Western public for its religious and cultural significance. It was the story of a Mohammedan acrobat who was mesmerized by the beauty of an American girl. It was the account of Mezuz William Veritch, who discovered the novel world through his performances at two famous theaters: the Emma Warde Burlesque Company and the Madison Street Opera House (The Pittsburgh Press 1892, 11). As his acrobatic acumen reached its mature stage, he became a permanent member of the Ward Company and earned "200 dollars a week as a gymnast" (The Pittsburgh Press 1892, 11). As soon as he got acquainted with Miss Frances Mallet, he fell in love with her, and his amorous adventure started to strike his peers' immediate response.

The rhetoric of cultural distancing and xenophobic attitudes was a dominant strand in the handling of William Veritch's case. Right from the onset, he was referred to as a "little man with a brown face and dark mustache" (The Pittsburgh Press 1892, 11). Those racial traits as distinguishing physiognomies of a North African were enough prejudices to qualify Veritch not as a welcomed acrobat but as a contemptuous being. The pitch of disdain was more exacerbated by the nickname assigned to Veritch as "French of the Boulevards" (The Pittsburgh Press 1892, 11). North Africa, as an annexed territory under the French regime, was a recurring image in the American media repertoire. The colonial charge of that nickname, "French of the Boulevards," reinforced the bifurcation between Eastern and Western subjects. Since Veritch was identified as French rather than Moroccan, the intent was to relegate him to a submissive position. The word "Boulevards" was even an insinuation of Veritch's position as an acrobat living on the fringe and the margin of French cities.

To counter Bernard Lewis's clashing thesis, which drew demarcatory walls between Islam and Christianity as two contentious creeds, Muslim travelers and acrobats transcended that narcissistic dichotomy. Lewis's main argument was premised on the fact that "voluntary conversions from Islam to Christianity are exceedingly rare" (Lewis, 1982, p. 182). William Veritch obfuscated Lewis's argument in the sense that he voluntarily converted to Christianity to marry his Catholic friend. The story of his marriage was full of tribulations and religious animosities as William Veritch, the true Mohammedan, was denied access to Frances Mallet's Christian world. Frances Mallet's parents categorically refused to marry their daughter to a Mohammedan. All religious and cultural barriers did not halt Veritch from joining his beloved.

The genuine narrative of William Mezuz Veritch engendered a seething clash between the Muslim community in the United States and Catholic priests. After several attempts to dissuade Catholic priests to give their consent on the possible marriage of Veritch and Frances Mallet, the Father Reynolds, an American priest, firmly declared that he "could not marry a Catholic to a Mohammedan" (Pittsburgh Press, 1892, p. 11). Veritch went further to save his love adventure and solicited some American Archbishops, namely Feehan who himself referred Veritch to Muldoon, Chancellor of the Cathedral. Muldoon gave the last verdict and affirmed that "Veritch would have to become a Catholic and forswear the Prophet and Islam. He would also have to get a dispensation".

(Pittsburgh Press, 1892, p 11). Caught between fear of apostasy and loss of his beloved, Veritch was enraged by the Catholic priests' decision.

That love story had all the ingredients to end up with Veritch's refusal to embrace Catholicism; however, he finally consented to become a Christian. Neither fear of religious contamination nor curses of infidelity were hindrances to hamper Veritch's journey to win Mallet's heart. Contrary to Bernard Lewis's postulation that Muslims who traveled to Christian lands retained their Islamic creed and, though forced to convert, their renunciations were "of doubtful sincerity" (Lewis, 1982, p. 182), Veritch openly announced his true voluntary Christianization. Such renunciation was even espoused by his confession before Catholic priests at Saint Ann's Church, Englewood. As soon as Veritch was baptized, marriage festivities loomed and the audience was in extreme joviality. Veritch's narrative of fact problematized Bernard Lewis's orientalist claim and reconfigured the image of the Muslim Other. Beyond religious acrimony, which could thwart Veritch's adventure, he embraced Christianity and demystified the trope of antagonism between Islam and Christianity.

Another hidden narrative of fact, less documented in Western archival sources, was the account of Hoummad Aitouarab, who married an American woman, Patricia Tish. Hoummad, originally from Taroudant, Sus region of Morocco, toured Germany, England, Spain and the United States of America (The Daily Register 1983, 13). In 1977, while Hoummad was performing with the Hassani troupe of Tangier, he met Patricia Tish, who was also serving as a clown with an American acrobatic troupe (The Daily Register 1983, 13). At a time when the conjugal lives of couples of different creeds were intermittent and spasmodic due to religious incommensurability, Hoummad transcended the tenuous precincts of religion and married Patricia.

A gloss over interracial and interfaith marriage between Oriental Muslim acrobats and Western Christian women revealed cases of parallel antagonism from both parties. Hadj Tahar, a Moroccan acrobat mentioned earlier, married three Western women and consequently expressed his abhorrence of "marrying girls of your own religion" (The Brooklyn Daily Eagle 1928, 10). Similarly, American Critics "worried that it was not Eastern religions that were so persuasive to American women but the masculine Eastern persona symbolized by the turban-clad" (Nance, 2009, p. 206). For Patricia, the exotic and the masculine nature of Eastern acrobats was not the dominant factor that attracted her attention. Patricia married Hoummad and agreed to serve as a housewife to care for her children. As the religious and cultural barriers were permeable frontiers between Hoummad and Patricia, she, after sacrificing her professional career for domestic roles, acknowledged that "I is a great sacrifice for me because he has gone an average of at least eight months a year" (The Daily Register 1983, 13).

In sum, the story of cultural and interfaith marriage between Patricia and Hoummad rendered religious and cultural parochialism hollow concepts and vacuous claims. A parallel comparison could be drawn between Hoummad's and Ali Hassani's interfaith marriages. While Tamara Polakovs overtly expressed her refrain towards Ali's skill since she considered his performances in Moroccan traditional souks as "a form of begging" (The Guardian 1980, 11), Patricia Tish opted for the domestic role to let her husband thrive in his professional career. The account of Hoummad and Patricia was a rewritten version of the epistemic dyad: Christianity vs Islam.

Interracial and interfaith marriages were common among Arab acrobats performing in Western circuses. Since most of them were in the show business with Western actresses and dancers, amorous stories were woven, and marriage was a natural consequence. Scanty references were made to many Arab performers who married Western actresses and female dancers. To give some examples, Jbilou, a Moroccan acrobat from Tangier, created the Seven Ben Hali, a Whirlwind of acrobats. He was a member of that troupe in 1937 (Telhine, 2013, p. 64). Jbilou married a German actress and had a son named Hafid, who practiced acrobatics at an early age. Jbilou's nephew, Mohamed ben Abderrahmane Sahraoui, was born in Tangier and practiced acrobatics with his uncle until he moved to Germany, where he joined Moqaddam Si Mbarek ben Bella (Telhine, 2013, p. 64). In 1952, he married a German actress and had three daughters, Mennana, who died at an early age, Aicha, and Leila (Telhine, 2013, p. 71).



Figure 5. Sahraoui with two German actresses at the Berlin Campaign in 1930. Maybe one of them was his wife

There were other acrobatic figures that were enchanted by the beauty of Western females and established amorous alliances beyond the tenuous and rigid frame of religion. Ibrahim Ben Lahsen, a Moroccan acrobat, married McDougall Joyce, an English circus dancer, in a festive wedding in the center ring of the Ringling Bros., New York. There were at least 15000 performers who celebrated with the bride and the groom (The Cedar Rapids Gazette 1966, 18). That wedding displayed cultural crossover and engagement with Western norms. The reigning normative was to present the Arab athletic man as “a Bedouin horseman, a more secular, a masculine free spirit and a heroic villain” (Nance, 2009, p. 112). Brahim ben Lahsen, not as a disturbing villain of Western serenity, married McDougall Joyce before the Western public as an overt indication of cultural and religious acceptance. The trope of Arab acrobats as heroic Bedouins who invaded Western circuses, not as cultural mediators, fell as a hollow and ad hominem in the case of Brahim Ben Lahsen.



Figure 6. McDougall Joyce, a circus dancer, and Brahim Ben Lahcen. They got married in the circus ring at Bailey and Barnum circus, New York



Figure 7. Brahim Ben Lahsen and McDougall Joyce parading during their marriage wedding.

To give more credence to Arab performers as contributors and maintainers of cultural and religious fluidity, Mokhtar Chaoui, a Moroccan acrobat who marked his acrobatic debut in 1946, married an American girl in 1961. Mokhtar traced the reminiscences of his love story and marriage offer: J'avais rencontré ma femme en 1961 à Détroit. Un jour, je l'ai appelé et je lui ai dit "veux-tu m'épouser?" Elle m'a répondu "Oui" Je lui ai alors dit "Rejoins-moi donc à Montréal!" C'est ce qu'elle fit après avoir pris deux semaines de congé. Nous avons travaillé ensemble pour un club, le "Paradise City"; puis, au cirque Kenie (Telhine, 2013, p. 77)

As love fueled his psyche from the first glimpse, Mokhtar won the heart of his future wife. Without any further delay, that could again surge up abstinence from marrying a Christian girl, under the alibi of religious restraints, Mokhtar's wife joined her husband and accepted his generous offer. To sum up, though Orientalist tales dominated the encounter between Arab acrobats and Western females as fixed paradigms, narrativizing forms that obliterated the possibility of establishing cultural and religious ties, Arab male acrobats were keen on undoing those fetishized premises. The portrait of Arab males as lascivious and threatening villains turned into hollow arguments since most of the Arab acrobats formed alliances with Christian women beyond impulsive mania and lust.

Conclusion

This article has traced the history of Arab acrobats in Western circuses, starting with their remarkable debut in the early nineteenth century as a long-sought means of supplying the show performance enterprise in the United States of America, England, Germany, and Australia. Commencing their migratory experiences through "travel arrangements and contracts with American circus recruiters or shipping brokers in Beirut, Izmir, or Tripoli" (Nance, 2009, p. 114), Arab acrobats, endowed with their immeasurable zest to gain performing expertise, were recruited as agents to ethnically exhibit their local cultural assets. Beyond the human zoo's ethnic, cultural, and racial nomenclatures that preclude the possibility of African exhibitionists' enunciation as deciding human forces, Arab acrobats were agile performers and active participants in metropolitan circuses. Performing as acrobats, jugglers, contortionists, impresarios, and dancers, Arabs ventured to the Western-dominated circuses and fairs, namely vaudeville theatre, hippodrome stages, and the New Tivoli Theatre (Sydney, Australia).

Bearing their Arab personae, Arab acrobats formed talented groups and spectacular crews that mesmerized Western audiences and captivated their thoughts. Their factual narratives discredit and dethrone Bernard Lewis's orientalist thesis, which rested on religious clashes. Lewis, in his book *Europe and Islam* (2007, 9), ascribes the scarce cultural contacts between Muslims and Europe to the restrictions of shari'a that prohibit Muslims from dwelling in the land of infidels. Contra-distinctly, Arab acrobats formed their cultural communities and debunked the long-held clichés of Christian

infidelity. They were not mere passing-by visitors, but they were permanent performers in circuses and the business show industry in general. Some of them chose, after naturalization, to become Western citizens and opted for intercultural marriage.

References

- “An attractive Akabah girl.” (1923, May 27). *Sunday Times*, 6. Perth, WA.
- “A new prince has just come to town.” (1898). *The San Francisco Call*.
- Albuquerque Journal*. (1908, p. 9).
- Australian Star*. (1905, July 8, p. 7).
- Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. (1974, January 22, p. 20).
- Geelong Advertiser*. (1905, July 8, p. 7).
- Hamid, G. A. (2004). *Circus, as told to his son, George A. Hamid, Jr.* Sterling Publishing.
- Lewis, B. (1982). *The Muslim discovery of Europe*. W. W. Norton.
- Lewis, B. (2007). *Europe and Islam*. American Enterprise Institute Press.
- Matar, N. (2008). Spain through Arab eyes, c. 1573–1691. In *Europe observed* (pp. 123–143). Bucknell University Press.
- Matar, N. (2009). *Europe through Arab eyes*. Columbia University Press.
- Matar, N. (2013). *In the lands of the Christians: Arabic travel writing in the 17th century*. Routledge.
- Nance, S. (2009). *How the Arabian Nights inspired the American dream, 1790–1935*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Suleiman, M. (Ed.). (1999). *Arabs in America: Building a new future*. Temple University Press.
- Telhine, M. (2013). *Les acrobates de Tanger, les artistes de la troupe*. L’Harmattan.
- The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. (1928, September 9).
- The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. (1928, p. 10).
- The Cedar Rapids Gazette*. (1966, p. 18).
- The Daily Register*. (1983, p. 13).
- The Guardian*. (1980, August 11, p. 11).
- The Guardian*. (1980, p. 11).
- The Philadelphia Inquirer*. (1928, September 1, p. 1).
- The Philadelphia Inquirer*. (1971, p. 34).
- The Pittsburgh Press*. (1892, p. 11).
- The San Francisco Call*. (1899, January 23).
- Circopedia. (n.d.). *Circopedia*. <https://www.circopedia.org/>

Notes

¹In his *In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century* (2003), Nabil Matar cogently explores the role of Arab travel writings in debunking the trope that traveling during the Early modern period was a Euro-Christian exclusivity. Focusing on many Arab travelers, namely Abu Quassim Al Hajari, Ahmad Bin Mohammed Al Khalidi Al Safadi and Ilyas Hanna al Mawsuli, Matar deploys these sources to demonstrate that the main deterrent of Arabs’ journeys to Europe was not attributed to the absence of curiosity, as Bernard Lewis postulates, but linked to the mutual fear that both Europeans and Arabs developed out of intermittent confrontation. As the Levant and the Mediterranean Basin were fierce grounds of piratical incursions, traveling towards the European Other was taken with reserve. Similarly, harbingers of “Reconquista” dominated the scene in the Iberian Peninsula as Christians insisted on taking vengeance for the Muslims’ invasion of their Christian territories. Despite the fact that signs of war and encroachment were still brewing over, Arab travelers developed alliances with the Christian Other, resulting in cultural reciprocity and religious tolerance.

²Ali Shribb is referred to as a member of Abdulah’s acrobatic troupe or Abdulah’s brother’s group. Abdulah Ben Boujemaa, a Moroccan acrobat from tangier, was referred to in several archival texts as a strong man who could carry from seven to nine acrobats on his shoulders. For more insight into his acrobatic career, see *World’s News* (Sydney, NSW : 1901 - 1955), Saturday 23 January 1904, page 9.

³ Christian Raab, Hassan Ben Ali's widow, is alluded to in an account detailing her arrival in Tangier to investigate the ambiguous circumstances of her husband's death.

⁴ Ali Hassani marked his acrobatic professional debut in Marrakech, where he received the rudimentary skills of tumbling at an early age. Born in 1927, Ali Hassani led a life profuse with tribulations and hardships. As a little kid, he was kidnapped by an acrobatic troupe from Spain to perform. It was there that he lived under the sequels of Civil War (1936-1939) and the Second World War. In spite of his kidnapping at an early age, his curiosity and zest to practice acrobatics enthralled his thought as his daughter Zayna declared in one of her interviews 'he used to run and watch and the tumblers said : do you want to do this ? He was quite cheeky and said « yes » ' (see http://www.circopedia.org/Main_Page for more details on his biography). In 1950, he moved to England and joined Billy Smart's, a famous British acrobat and manager, acrobatic enterprise.

⁵ Hadj Tahar was a pioneer of acrobatics in the Western exhibition enterprise. He debuted his career as a professional acrobat in the United States of America in 1865. He was considered as an acrobatic pillar in introducing the art of tumbling and pyramid building to the American audience.

⁶ Mohammed Ben Belkasem is a Moroccan acrobat who performed with Hassan Ben Ali Toofoonin's troupe of acrobats.

⁷ Mohammed Ben Ali was a Moroccan manager of acrobats. He was Fatima Bousetta's father, a female acrobat mentioned earlier. He was the founder of the Ifni Sahara troupe of acrobats, in which Ahmed Ben Ali Zinati was a tumbler. He also created, in coordination with Raho, a Moroccan acrobat, a troupe named "Atlas Bay".

⁸ William Mezuz Veritch was a Moroccan acrobat who performed in France and the United States of America. It was reported by the Pittsburgh Press (1892, p: 11) that his father was chief in his tribe of Arab slave-traders. His father was also described as a notable figure and a close friend of the Sultan. While his first appearance at Western circuses can be traced back to 1870, as reported by the Pittsburgh Press (1892), the circumstances of his inception in Western fairs and hippodromes were never documented. He dropped out of school at an early age to fulfill his dream as an acrobatic performer. During his sojourn in the United States of America, he mastered languages and became a well-educated person.

⁹ Mokhtar Chaoui, originally from Tangier, ventured to the Spanish circus, Circo Corosana, in 1946. He worked with Ben Ali's troupe in Portugal in 1947. He journeyed in different British, American, Danish and German circuses. He retired from acrobatics in 1964. Then, he worked as a driver of the loader machine and hotel receptionist (Telhine, 2013, p. 76)
