

## Asilah Arts Festival (Morocco): encounters in the urban space

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to present Asilah Arts Festival through its history, program and outcomes, as an interactive platform for international and local cultural interchange and diffusion but especially, as the essential preservative source it still is, particularly regarding the town's urban and architectural ensemble and the national and international, material and immaterial legacy it celebrates. The methodology for this research combined a critical bibliographical analysis, followed by a three weeks stay in the Moroccan town carrying out fieldwork that included interviews, visits to sites of interest or participation in the event's activities. The results obtained from this investigation have in this paper been grouped in four sections: "Urban and architectural heritage", "Cultural heritage", "Social impact" and "Everyday life". These tackle how the event affects local economy, contributes to the population's education, raises awareness towards the importance of the patrimony's safeguarding or renders explicit the value of the town's quotidian existence.

**Key words:** Festival, Asilah, intercultural exchange, heritage preservation

### El Festival de las Artes de Asilah (Marruecos): encuentros en el espacio urbano

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta el Festival de las Artes de Asilah a través de su historia, programa y resultados como plataforma para el intercambio y la difusión cultural tanto a nivel nacional como internacional y, especialmente, como el esencial recurso preservador que todavía hoy es, particularmente en relación al patrimonio arquitectónico y urbanístico de la ciudad, así como a la cultura material e inmaterial, local e internacional que celebra. La metodología utilizada combina un análisis crítico de los recursos bibliográficos seguido de tres semanas de trabajo de campo en Asilah, realizando entrevistas, visitas a lugares de interés o participando en las actividades del evento. Las conclusiones obtenidas son aquí presentadas en cuatro apartados: "Patrimonio urbano y arquitectónico", "Patrimonio cultural", "Impacto social" y "Vida cotidiana". Estas secciones abordan cómo el evento afecta a la economía local, contribuye a la educación de la población, genera conciencia de la necesidad de salvaguardar el patrimonio o revela el valor de la cotidianeidad.

**Palabras clave:** Festival, Asilah, intercambio cultural, preservación del patrimonio

### Introduction

Every summer since 1978, the small Atlantic coastal town of Asilah, located 42 kilometers away from Tangier, holds its renowned Arts Festival. A complete program of cultural activities is developed during two weeks, turning the village into an artistic outburst that attracts artists, scholars and public from all over the globe.

Some years before 1978, the journalist and politician Mohamed Benaïssa (b.1937) and the artist Mohamed Melehi (b.1936) returned to their hometown and found it highly deteriorated (Al Radi 1994: 47). The two friends started a campaign that aimed to encourage the

population to collaborate in creating better life conditions in a more hygienic and carefully preserved town, an enterprise that started from simple responses like the easing of the garbage collection (Al Radi 1994: 47).

In parallel to these improvement tasks, Benaïssa and Melehi dealt with the Town's Council to remodel the external appearance of the almost ruined town by paving the streets with a wavy design by Melehi or restoring ancient houses and historic buildings like the Portuguese Kamra Tower or the Rassouni Palace (Al Radi 1994: 55), headquarter of the Festival during its first years. Most of these works were accomplished by local craftsmen using traditional methods, forms and materials, contributing this way to simultaneously preserve the tradition,

engage population with the protection of their environment and help them benefit from their own work (Lin E.M).

The rehabilitation project aspired to be coherent with the original image of the town and, through the insertion of arches or doorways from ancient ruined buildings or the inclusion of traditional features of the region like the *zellij* tiles, it paid tribute to the local architectural tradition (Al Radi 1994: 55). This respectful architectural intervention received the Aga Khan Award of Architecture in 1989 and the town was declared National Monument (Harrouni 2010: 5).

In 1978, with the first successful efforts, the two friends launched an event under the slogan “Culture and Art for Development” (Gilbert 2009), in which a wide range of cultural activities brought together international and local participants (Hayes , D. B. 1994). This was the first edition of the Festival, which would later crystallize into a long lasting traditional celebration still alive today thanks to the foundation of Al Mouhit Association (Al Radi 1994: 51), now the Forum of Asilah.

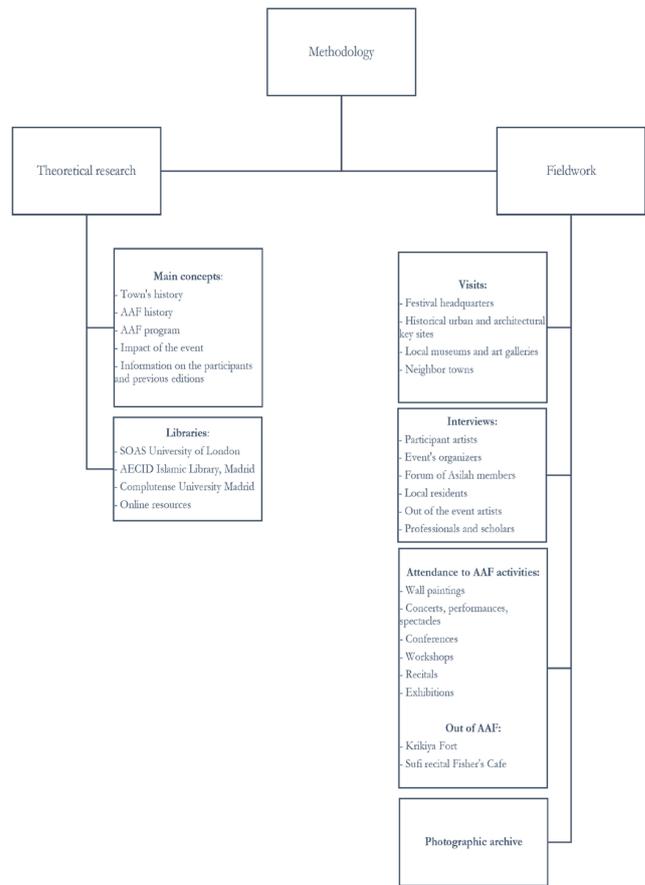
**Methods and methodology**

This research project was conceived within the framework of the Final Dissertation for the MA in History of Art and Architecture of the Islamic Middle East, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Publications on AAF are rare and thus, an academic and critical theoretical research was necessarily complemented by a stay in Asilah, endorsed by the Ralph Pinder Wilson Award 2015. This article will therefore be partially based in the conclusions drawn from this investigation.

In order to balance the scarce bibliographical resources and to build a photographic archive of the festival, the town and its surroundings, the author used three means during her visit to Asilah, as previously reported in Gómez López, (in press):

- Interviews with participant artists (e.g. Othman el Bahri, Hakim Ghailan, Malika Agueznyay or Mizue Sawano), event organizers and coordinators (e.g. Mohamed Anzaoui, Abdallah El-Hariri), Forum of Asilah members (e.g. Majdouline Khalladi), local residents or artists not included in the Festival’s program (e.g. Mustafa, Karim). Gallerists and knowledgeable professionals were also interviewed (e.g. Mareta Espinosa, Said Messari or Anne Judith).
- On site visits to the Festival quarters (e.g. Bibliothèque Prince Bandar, Centre Hassan II, Raissouni Palace or medina), Asilah art galleries (e.g. Aplanos, Monassilah), local artists’ ateliers located in traditional restored houses (e.g. Hadik Haddari) and urban and architectural key sites (e.g. Kamra Tower, Raissouni Palace, Kirikiya, Lakma).
- Attendance to the programmed activities for summer 2015 and out of the Festival events with local residents (e.g. Fishers’ Café Sufi recital).

**Graphic 1.- Methodology.**



**The town**

Asilah was founded in 1500 BC standing now in the Atlantic coast 42 km southeast Tangier (Harrouni 2010: 1) [figure 1]. This strategic location led the Phoenician, Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, Portuguese or Spanish civilizations to settle down there. The coastal town remained under Phoenician and Carthaginian control, until the 9<sup>th</sup> century when it was occupied by the Arabs and Normans, when the original medina was built (Lin E.M). Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Asilah was disputed by the Portuguese, Moroccan and Spanish, a period from which still stand the constructions of Raissouni Palace, the Kamra Tower or the walls.



**Figure 1.- Asilah general view from the port.**

In 1692 the town came back to Moroccan hands to become a piracy base until the beginning of the 20th century, when it was incorporated for a short period of time as part of the Spanish Protectorate (LinEM). It wasn't until 1956 that Morocco reached its independence, this small town remaining as a crossroad of architectural styles and grounded customs from the superimposed civilizations that had inhabited it.

Urbanistically speaking, Asilah is today compounded by two well differentiated areas: the newly developed one, articulated around the Avenue Hassan II and the Place Mohamed V that includes the Spanish quarter or the Lakma, and the medina, founded in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, altered by the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and finally restored in the late 70's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but still preserving its original labyrinthine layout (Nakhli 2009: 195).

The outskirts of the medina are chaotic and dynamic, they being the location of the main restaurants, markets and shops. The medina, perfectly integrated in this chaos, is a quiet place compounded by a small labyrinth of narrow streets accessible through the gates that pierce the still standing Portuguese walls. Inside the medina there is a touristic souk, few cafes, some shops dispersed in its streets, mosques, the Centre Hassan II and Raissouni Palace, ancient cemeteries, some residences and hotels, artisanal bread ovens or a wide number of galleries and artists' workshops located in traditional houses.

### The Festival

Generally speaking, the Festival annually includes similar activities. Among these, the mural paintings are probably the most accessible and famous ones. Year after year, the walls of the medina are whitewashed and international and national artists, in collaboration con local youth, transform the external appearance of the town by decorating its walls with new designs [figure 2].



**Figure 2.-** Hiba Khamlici. Medina wall painting. AAF 15.

In previous editions of the Festival, some of the participants have been Moroccan Sanae Sarghini and Abderrahman Rahoule, Spanish María Ángeles Testera, Syrian Khaled al Saa'i or Japanese Mizue Sawano.

Interestingly, the artists are spread in the labyrinthine medina, in their allocated walls, it being necessary to wander and get lost to find them. This encourages a different bodily interaction with the urban space: international visitors are led to hidden corners they would otherwise miss and local population rediscovers the known and apprehended space through the artistic catalyst. On the other hand, the lively evolution of these urban canvasses surrounded by the drafts the artists do on the wall, emphasizes the "here and now" idiosyncrasy of the event and the "always being and becoming" character of any urban space.

Together with these street art works, there is a wide range of artistic workshops, among which we can count the engraving, painting, children or writing ones [figure 3]. They are usually held at the Raissouni Palace, an historical site inserted at the core of the medina and thus, in permanent dialogue with Asilah medina's everyday life. Some pieces are later displayed in different venues as part of a whole program of indoor and outdoor exhibitions that also show the work of other emergent and consolidated, national and international artists.



**Figure 3.-** Artistic workshops, Raissouni Palace. AAF 15.

Awards like the Prix Bouland al Haïdari de la Jeune Poésie Arabe or the Prix Tchicaya UTam'si de la Poésie Africain are conceded in order to promote and encourage creative production. A complete program of international music concerts is also held at the Bibliothèque Prince Bandar during these weeks, including in past editions artists and groups like fado singer Cuca Rosetta, Ensemble Ahl Assilah, flamenco singer Mariana Collado, Indian artist Vidya Shah or Moroccan Saloua Chouair.

Finally, and in a more theoretical line, a program of interdisciplinary conferences and colloquiums given by the most expert scholars coming from all over the world is offered, among which subjects we can find lectures on identity, cinema, climate change or literature. In previous editions the titles have been "Arab media in the era of digital information", "The cinema and the novel in the films of the South", "The new contours of orientalism in international and Arab contemporary arts" or "Seasons in the Arab Uprising as seen by us and by the others" ([www.issuu.com](http://www.issuu.com)).

### Discussion and results

The on-site research results could be divided in general terms in four sections that will present in first place, the preservative claim towards the town's urban and architectural heritage. Secondly, the preservative and spreading attitude towards different cultural manifestations. Following the second point, is the social impact of the event in educational, spatial and economic aspects. And finally, the fourth section will present those results linked to Asilah's everyday life and its local artistic panorama.

#### — Urban and architectural heritage

The preservative claim towards Asilah urban and architectural sites is an inherent aspect of the Festival since its foundation. In fact, the origins of the event are unavoidably linked to the previously mentioned preservative initiative by Melehi and Benaïssa. The two friends' enterprise was born to revitalize and restore a neglected and almost ruined town in collaboration with its inhabitants, and the Festival was then presumably funded to maintain this positive and careful attitude towards their city.

As a matter of fact, a preventive attitude towards their heritage has been developed over the years since this intervention in the late 70's and the survival of the *moussem*. This is evidenced in the periodical interventions of the sites, a pre-Festival annual inspection and an updated use of its renovated historical installations as Festival headquarters. As an example, we could cite the case of the Raïssouni Palace, funded in 1909 by the pirate Pasha Ahmed Raïssouni and today used as headquarter for the artistic workshops and as a residence to accommodate international participants (Lin E.M.).

The proposal of conferring the buildings a more actualized function, more coherent with the new circumstances and needs, instead of turning them into museums or leaving them to their fate, has successfully enabled their optimum (and now, as Festival headquarters, necessary) maintenance while keeping them open and accessible to the public.

#### — Cultural heritage

Secondly, a preservative and bidirectional (local-international) disseminative attitude towards traditional and contemporary cultural expressions was revealed during the study. Evidence of this fact were the interweaved celebration of gnawa or fado music performances beside the latest artistic manifestations or the interdisciplinary conferences and both of them, in turn, celebrated side by side with local artistic production. Thanks to their celebration, these manifestations are spread and perpetuated, while simultaneously transforming the city into a stage for intercultural dialogue.

The use of *moussem* as Festival's designation seems to be all in all a statement of intent. This is an Arabic word used to describe a traditional and seasonal Moroccan festivity with an ontological nature, related to agricultural cycles and religious events (such as Ramadan) during which varied rituals and cultural activities are performed (Reysoo 1988; Benaïssa, M. et al. 1979: 34). The celebration of Asilah Moussem is, in the fullest sense, a perpetuation of this ancestral practice and a metaphorical expressive claim towards the survival of the whole ensemble of the Moroccan cultural heritage (Gómez López, In press).

#### — Social impact

The Festival has become an important cultural event in Morocco, bringing with it a lot of advantages to the coastal town and its population since its first edition.

AAF has disclosed a clear educational claim based on the inhabitants' active engagement. Most activities are free access and attempt to bring a bit of the international cultural panorama to the town while encouraging a festive and entertaining approach to their own heritage as well (Gómez López, In press).

This inclusive attitude has been present since the event's origins, when the local population was employed for the restoration works or invited to collaborate with the rest of participants in the different activities of the program. Today, this has been perpetuated through the inclusion of activities like the already mentioned artistic workshops for children, concerts or conferences and the attractive possibility of interacting with the visiting international participants, usually accessible during those days.

In parallel to this cultural learning, the Festival has also fostered a different bodily, hands-on interaction with the inhabited space. For example, the Raïssouni Palace children's workshops frequently depart from a previous urban and architectural experimentation in their hometown on which they later develop their artistic works [figure 4]. Besides this, the local youth assists the participant artists in the wall paintings, rediscovering the urban space they inhabit through its artistic intervention,

and the adults are still involved in the town's restoration campaigns, as they were in the 1970's original preservative proposal by Melehi and Benaïssa. This has interestingly led to a rediscovery and better knowledge of their hometown, while simultaneously raising awareness of its safeguarding needs and procedures (Gómez López, In press).

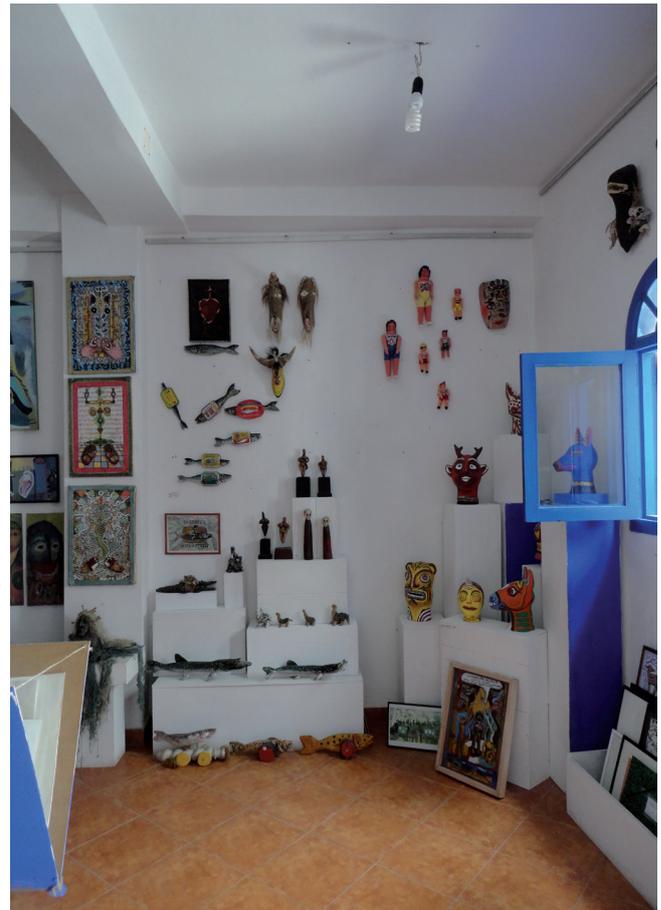


**Figure 4.**- Children workshop, Raissouni Palace. AAF 15.

As concluding point of this social impact section, it has been considered important to mention the economic benefits the Festival annually brings (Benaïssa M. et al. 1979). Originally conceived as an activity which incomes would directly reward local population, the renovated aspect of the town and the raising interest in the activities organized as part of the Festival reactivated local tourism, essential resource for Asilah's economy.

This touristic boom brought along several debates and international interests in building resorts and touristic complexes, rejected by Benaïssa, President of the Municipal Council since 1983 (Al Radi 1994: 51). The founder of the Festival defended the population to keep on being the main beneficiary of the Festival's profits, the controlled growth of the town and the preservation of its traditional image and identity (Al Radi 1994: 55).

AAF still attracts people from all over the world, keeping alive local tourism and annually boosting the town's economy, having as well an indirect impact in surrounding towns like Tetouan, Tangier, Lixus or Larache.



**Figure 5.**- Monassilah art gallery. Asilah, July 2015.

#### —Everyday life

Thanks to the urban staging of the event, Asilah's everyday life is rendered explicit. The performance of the quotidian and the spectacle meet, redefining Asilah's medina during the festival and revealing the performance of the ordinary through the urban staging of the extraordinary. This way, the city embracing different cultural manifestations, conversely obtains international visibility.

Together with the town's everyday life and its traditional customs, the local cultural panorama emerges before the audience's eyes these days. From its cultural fabric, we could mention the daily gnawa performance at the Krikiya fort, the weekly Sufi recital at the Fisher's Café or the presence of art galleries such as Monassilah or Aplanos which, during those weeks prepare special shows usually devoted to local creators [figure 5].

Among the artists based in Asilah, we would like to cite the calligrapher Hadik Haddari, which decorated studio in the heart of the medina could easily be confused with a mural of the Festival. Mustafa and his brother, well known for their stylized Berber and Sufi musicians and dancers made of grinded natural pigments on cement wrapping paper. Their atelier, placed in a tiny second-floor room in a traditional house of the medina, can be visited daily. Another prominent artist from Asilah is the known as "the

painter of medinas”, whose works are a chaotic and colorful superimposition of hardly recognizable Asilah urban details (street lamps, doors, windows, domes, mosques) on wood planks, canvas or fabrics, present in all the city stalls [figure 6]. Finally, Karim, born in Zagora, sells his intervened Berber pieces and his painted wooden boards beside the Portuguese walls, close to the Krikiya Fort.



Figure 6.- Painter of medinas. Asilah, July 2015.

AAF has steadily become more complex and crowded, receiving lesser critics concerning its repetitive character, the weak information distribution or the activities' limited places. However, its organizers still fight for preserving its authenticity and those aspects that differentiate it from other national festivals. Its main challenges today are to avoid falling in reiteration, conformism and restriction, evolving into a facile touristic bait lacking of its original powerful and praiseworthy principles and disregarding its fundamental inclusive, preservative and instructive function (Gómez López, In press).

## Conclusion

Asilah's Festival is not unique in Morocco. Other *moussems*, contemporary art events and festivals in which the latest trends are combined with ancestral traditions are celebrated in the country throughout the year. Essaouira Gnawa, Moussem Moulay Idriss Zarhoun, Agadir Festival, Marrakech Popular Arts Festival, Timitar Festival, JIDAR in Rabat, Marrakech Biennale, Boulevard Festival in Casablanca, Remp' Arts Festival in Azemmour or Al Dusheira are some examples.

Together with these events, the foundation of dynamic cultural institutions, the improvement of the existing ones and the progressive proliferation of specialized publications, both inside and outside the country, are making out of Morocco an interesting emerging field for contemporary art production, promotion and exhibition that is still in the process of finding its place in the international artistic arena.

Throughout the paper, the central role AAF has played in the last years has been presented, aspiring to introduce it as the essential preservative and educative source with wide impact in different spheres it is. Further on, we have aimed to demonstrate to what extent this event has been crucial in reactivating the hosting town's awareness towards the preservation and dissemination of its rich legacy and the other foreign cultural expressions celebrated as part of the festival.

With this educative and preservative nature, the *moussem* of Asilah was a pioneer initiative in the late 20th century, standing out from other Moroccan festivals while broadly demonstrating since its foundation the grand and diverse potential of art. Beyond these characteristics, its great value resides in the power of claiming towards the importance, not only of the town's urban and architectural ensemble or of the wide range of cultural manifestations it promotes, but also of the town's everyday life, appreciating the known and ordinary besides the staged and unusual.

Through its annual launch, the event has steadily found itself a place in Asilah's life, becoming an inherent part of the town's history and the cultural heritage it aims to preserve.

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