

The Means of Love in the Arab World: Pragmatics Beyond Norms and Transgressions

International Workshop

Centre Jacques-Berque, Rabat, Morocco 11-12 December 2015

Convenors

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In the Arab world, romantic attachment has a long history recorded in poetry and popular culture, but globalisation has given it a new shape, and also new urgency. Love in the Arab world today has an impact on demographic, cultural, social, and hence also the political level. Anthropologists working in the region have consequently given increasing attention on the dynamics of intimate relationships, love and marriage. These dynamics are crucial for social and political dynamics and have the capacity to shape expectations in the intimate and the political realm alike.

This workshop intends to push light on the cultural, material and mediated means of love, relying on ethnographic case studies from North Africa and the Middle East. The means for the communication and practice of love can be linguistic, embodied, or mediated by objects like letters, pictures, exchanged gifts, or the dowry and furniture needed for marriage. Without these elements love would not be possible. The workshop seeks to analyse their symbolic, interactional, and material efficiency, intending to find ways to build a pragmatic approach for the study of love in a social setting where it is at once omnipresent and precarious.

Anthropological research about love in the Arab World has so far been especially perceptive of the moral and ethical dimension of love in regard to family ideals, ideals of personhood, gendered piety, and the production of modern subjectivities. However, such approach oriented on norms, ethics and governmentality risks to promote a conception of love that falls short of understanding its material and pragmatic subtleties and dynamics. In order to avoid focusing on discourse alone, contributions should emphasise observable situations where the means of love are at stake – one of the first tasks being to explore what interactional frames can be linked to love by individuals. These case studies are the material on which we hope to elaborate, beyond norms and transgressions, the tools for an understanding of love in action.

General Program

11 December

9:00 Welcoming of the Participants

9:15 Aymon Kreil (University of Zurich), Maria Frederika Malmström (Nordic Africa Institute / New York University), Zakaria Rhani (Université Mohammed V) and Samuli Schielke (Zentrum Moderner Orient)

Introduction: The Means of Love in the Arab World: Pragmatics Beyond Norms and Transgressions

10:00 Annelies Moors (University of Amsterdam)

Being Present in the World: The materiality of love and marriage

10:45 coffee break

11:15 Matthew Carey (University of Copenhagen)

These Obscured Acts of Affection: Using secrecy to make the everyday intimate in rural Morocco

12:00 Annerienke Fioole (University of Amsterdam)

Dealing With Inappropriate Intimacies: Resources for handling publicity, discretion and secrecy as a Moroccan couple

12:45 lunch

14:00 Zakaria Rhani (Université Mohammed V)

Entre les esprits et les hommes: Amour, charme et possession au Maroc

14:45 Nico Staiti (University of Bologna)

Double possession, double inversion: l'histoire d'un couple de Meknès (Maroc)

15:00 coffee break

15:30 Jamal Bammi (Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas / CJB)

Les plantes de l'amour : Anthropologie des relations amoureuses médiées par des substances naturelles

16:15 Sihem Benchekroun (psychotherapist and writer, Casablanca)

L'amour en souffrance : Observations d'un thérapeute de couple au Maroc

Conference Dinner

12 December

9:30 Nadjé Al-Ali (School of Oriental and African Studies)

Love Matters, No Matter What: Romance and intimacy in Iraq

10:15 coffee break

10:45 Mériam Cheikh (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

In Search of Respect, in Search of Love: The elaboration of affects in transactional sex among working class girls (Tangier – Morocco)

11:30 Sandra Nasser El-Dine (University of Helsinki)

Love and Money – Dichotomous or Not? Ammani youth narratives of romantic relationships

12:15 lunch

13:15 Corinne Fortier (LAS/CNRS)

Seduction and Love's Expenses in Mauritania

14:00 Luca Nevola (University of Milano-Bicocca)

"Oh SMS Message Enter the Phone of my Soulmate!": Love, mobile phones and the codification of intimacy in contemporary yemen

14:45 **General Discussion (with coffee and tea)**

16:30 **Public Presentation of the Results of the Workshop**

18:00 **End of the workshop**

13 December

10:00 **Theoretical brunch – final discussion (optional, only for the participants)**

Departure

Abstracts

Nadje Al-Ali

Love Matters, No Matter What: Romance and intimacy in Iraq

The proposed paper seeks to address understandings and practices of love in the context of the rapidly changing social, economic and political context in Iraq. Given the country's long history of violence, wars and the more recent atrocities linked to invasion, occupation, sectarianism and Islamist extremism, Iraq and Iraqis need to be thought of beyond its geographical boundaries to include both transnational activities and spheres as well as diasporic communities and links. In my talk I will address the question of how the material context for experiencing and acting in love and for love has changed drastically over the last decades. At the same time, I will try to show that while clearly impacted by dictatorship, sanctions, invasion, occupation and sectarianisms, romantic attachments, intimacy and being in love cannot be reduced to it. My paper will present preliminary work and will be the starting point for a larger and long term project, looking at understandings, practises and expressions of romantic love, intimacy and sexuality in Iraq and Palestine comparatively. For this talk, I will complement previously carried out informal interviews, life stories and oral histories, as well as ethnographic research in Iraqi Kurdistan and amongst the Iraqi diaspora in Amman, Erbil and London, with more recent observations.

Jamal Bammi

Les plantes de l'Amour : Anthropologie des relations amoureuses médiées par des substances naturelles

Une étude ethnographique a été menée sur des substances naturelles dites *'uchub al-nissa (les plantes des femmes)* en association avec des forces surnaturelles pour favoriser les relations amoureuses. Ces mélanges des femmes s'insèrent dans un culte multifactoriel visant à produire un effet réel ou perçu comme tel. La femme, partie prenante du culte, mais écartée des fonctions religieuses traditionnelles, a développé son savoir dans un espace différent, espace diffus, indifférencié et non codifié.

Sihem Benchekroun

L'amour en souffrance : Observations d'un thérapeute de couple au Maroc

Pourquoi et comment l'amour peut-il être en souffrance et quelles sont les attentes amoureuses des femmes et des hommes à Casablanca, comment l'amour s'exprime, comment il s'obtient ou s'achète, autant de questions qui se posent inévitablement auprès de mes consultants. Les cas que je vous présenterai proviennent de deux types de consultations : les premières ont lieu au sein du cabinet privé où j'exerce avec des femmes ou des hommes seuls, et où j'assure également des thérapies de couples ; les secondes se déroulent de façon hebdomadaire auprès d'une association caritative avec des jeunes femmes d'un milieu social modeste et de bas niveaux d'instruction exclusivement. En termes d'expressions amoureuses, le couple évolue souvent à l'inverse de la chirurgie esthétique : il y a bien "avant" et "après" mais c'est avant que c'est mieux, pas après. Avant : on exhibe et on distribue des marques d'amour symboliques et matériels pour obtenir satisfaction. Après, on retient, et on marchandise ces marques d'amour. Les comportements sont clairement différents selon que l'on se situe dans la phase d'approche et de séduction ou dans la phase du couple constitué, et au quotidien. Par ailleurs, en tant qu'écrivain, je me

suis consacrée au thème de l'amour et du couple dans la plupart de mes écrits ; c'est ainsi que j'ai pu recueillir au cours de mes nombreuses rencontres avec le public, des réflexions diverses sur la relation amoureuse, qui m'ont également éclairée sur les contradictions et les tensions que vivent aujourd'hui les couples marocains. Il m'est apparu que si notre pays est en "transition" économique et sociale, celle-ci concerne aussi les relations amoureuses au sein du couple, lesquelles subissent un nombre croissant de *heurts, d'incompréhensions et de contradictions*. Ainsi des courants modernistes et traditionnels cohabitent, se mélangent ou s'opposent non seulement au sein de la société mais parfois au sein même du couple, générant des confusions dans les "codes de référence". Le couple marocain se trouve alors en perte de repères entre des conventions et des attentes divergentes parfois jusqu'à l'extrême. Accueillant la modernité sur certains aspects, la refusant dans d'autres, il n'a pas toujours la stabilité suffisante pour assumer sa propre identité, et notamment marquer sa différence par rapport à l'entourage ou au contraire rester conforme à la tradition.

Matthew Carey

These Obscured Acts of Affection: Using secrecy to make the everyday intimate in rural Morocco

In Morocco's rural hinterland, just as in many other parts of the wider MENA region, discourses and representations of romantic love are an unavoidable aspect of everyday life. They are omnipresent in Berber and Arabic popular song, the principal point of the hugely popular Turkish, Egyptian and Latin American soap operas, and a recurrent theme of conversation. Actual public manifestations of romantic love between two people, in contrast, are few and far between. Even marriage and engagement ceremonies tend to sideline the question of affection and its performance, regardless of whether or not the relationship is a love match. What this means is that love and affection can only be made manifest either in the physical absence of their object or in spaces that have, by whatever means, been cloaked in secrecy or shrouded from view. And this, I suggest, is in fact their defining characteristic of the latter: actions or words are endowed with romantic significance by the act of cloaking that precedes them. In this paper, I draw on a series of case studies to explore the range of ways (distancing, digitalising and internalising) in which men and women endeavour to create the spaces of secrecy which both allow romantic affection to be expressed and actively produce it.

Mérim Cheikh

In Search Of Respect, In Search Of Love: The elaboration of affects in transactional sex among working class girls (Tangier – Morocco)

It has been already demonstrated among social scientists interested in intimate economies (i.e. practices of sex work that go beyond the mere exchange of money for sex) around the world (mainly the global South) that the explicit exchange of money between the sexes does not impede the circulation of sentiments. The intimate economy has nothing to do with a market of prostitution, on which prices and sexual services are strictly negotiated. The economic aspect in "intimate economy" refers to the lack of differentiation between the sphere of economic exchange and other social spheres as well as the intricacy of moral conceptions in the exchanges, which are both monetary and emotional exchanges. As a product of social activity, the intimate economy is structured around principles, norms, values and emotions

that underpin its moral dimension. Therefore, the intimate economy refers to everything that constitutes exchanges between the sexes: affects, property, prestige, values and norms. Relying on this conception of intimate economies, I would like to demonstrate how different meanings of love mark the trajectories of young working-class women struggling to become adult and respectable. I would like to emphasize how sexuality and certain values of love and sentiments are elaborated during adolescence (at the time of schooling) and how (when entering the deregulated under-skilled women's job market) they are negotiated, reinforced, diminished or ridiculed while women engage in intimate economies and experience difficulties to stabilize intimate relationships. In this process, values of love and romanticism are strongly embodied but also strongly criticized. What is at stake in the changing perceptions of love is, for young precarious women, the construction of respectability, which means transformation in the perception of masculinity and femininity as well as moral transformation of the self. Drawing on observations of the love affairs of girls who go out had during the seven years I frequented them, I would like to show how an heterosexual understanding of love is developed from adolescence to adulthood in which femininity lies in the ability to show competencies in being aware of actual sexual and intimate moralities, seductive but also intelligent enough as not to fail to achieve the main project of these precarious lives, that is, becoming adult and respectable.

Annerienke Fiole

Dealing With Inappropriate Intimacies: Resources for handling publicity, discretion and secrecy as a Moroccan couple

Marriage in Morocco evidently is of utmost importance as a sociable ideal and those who engage in intimacies beyond such marital confinements risk being stigmatised. Yet sexual experience out of wedlock in itself doesn't appear to be cause for outright rejection per se. Whereas the plight of Moroccan single mothers and their children born out of wedlock reinstates the stigmatisation of premarital and extramarital sexuality, the most problematic aspect here seems to be the blatant lack of concealment which puts these mothers in a position that can't be ignored. However, their situation doesn't just reveal a preceding transgression, but may also point to a lack of connections and resources to provide for alternatives. For the many possible ways to cover up an extramarital relation and even transform it into a legally recognised marital arrangement, one still must have the resources to pursue such alternative trajectories. The means available to Moroccan couples for handling publicity, discretion and secrecy will play a vital part in assessments of the legality and licitness of their relationship. Proceeding from a brief discussion of adoption arrangements, including cases of illegitimate children's covert adoptions, in this presentation the impossibility of separating love and intimacy from the means by which these are constituted will be foregrounded.

Corinne Fortier

Seduction and Love's Expenses in Mauritania

Men of Moorish society in Mauritania used to apply a courtesy code inspired by the Arab chivalry or *futuwwa*. At the beginning of the love relationship, the young man cannot declare directly to the girl that he loves her, but he manifests his love to her by allusions, by his patience, by his kindness, by his poems and especially by his

presents. The lover shows himself generous to the woman he loves, sparing no effort. Because countless spending his time, poems and money is like giving himself away. In the love relationship, the man bid higher by showing his generosity, value which makes his honor. The woman can accept poems and presents, without feeling grateful, which could even show herself thankless towards her benefactor. In Moorish society, the refusals from the woman, far from taking away the lover, arouse his desire. He is conscious of the game of seduction of the woman as shows it the affectionate term which it uses to call her in some poems: "traitress". Furthermore, the disappointment of the lover is not only related to the indifference of the beloved woman but also at the level of the idea of his own love. The poems as the numerous presents and services offered to the beloved woman participate in what Roland Barthes calls the expense of love. Through these multiple tests, young man learns the control of his desires. To the woman's caprices of woman answers the constancy of the lover. Rivalry with other young men in the conquest of a woman, as well as courage, tenacity and generosity he had to demonstrate are initiation proofs to surmount. Women are the object of the desire of men, desire that he learned to discipline by his courtship itself. Proofs of love are also proofs of virility.

Annelies Moors

Being Present In The World: The materiality of love and marriage

In my paper, I discuss how love materializes in the world. Love, and especially romantic love, is often seen - rather similar to modern religion - as interiority, as an inner feeling, that loses much of its aura if it becomes related to materiality, both in terms of form and economic interest. Yet, like religion, in order to be present in the world, love needs to take on particular material form. Just like people do religion, people also do love. 'Doing love' is often restricted to embodied forms of interaction, with the realm of love and that of materiality (beyond the body) seen in opposition to each other. There are, however, a myriad of ways in which materiality is at stake, both in the forms in which love becomes materially present (through things) and in the ways in which love intertwines with material interests. In my paper, I will discuss this, including some cases from Palestine.

Sandra Nasser El-Dine

Love and Money – Dichotomous Or Not? Ammani youth narratives of romantic relationships

Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork conducted among local and Syrian middle-classed youth in the Jordanian capital Amman, my study explores how different local notions of romantic love are deployed when they reflect on their experiences of intimate relationships (marital and pre-marital). My preliminary analysis suggests, that in Arab youth narratives, love (associated with the local concept of *'ishra*) is conceived as processual, developing in reciprocal interaction. My presentation discusses, how the exchange of favours is an elementary part of the performative acts which locally are considered to produce mutual affection in a romantic relationship. Reciprocal exchanges connote care and create love. In addition, these processes are deeply entangled with materiality. Conceptualizing material exchanges in intimate relationships within this framework questions the dichotomisation between 'love' and 'money', present in the current Western idealised notion of 'true love'. However, the entanglement of material exchanges and love is also being negotiated,

especially by young men. Performing masculinity in a relationship, which requires (often unattainable) financial capacity, is challenging for many young men in the current economical climate. Even though for most women, their partner's financial investments in a relationship signal care, commitment and respect, young men often equate their partner's willingness to compromise on material necessities with 'true love'.

Luca Nevola

“Oh SMS Message Enter the Phone of my Soulmate!”: Love, mobile phones and the codification of intimacy in contemporary Yemen

This presentation explores practices of 'remediation' of love poetry via the mobile phone among countrymen (*qaba'il*) of the Yemeni highlands. *Qaba'il* respond to rejection in love and to failed marriage by venting their passion through poems of the *qasida* genre. *Qasida's* romantic discourse is inherently conservative, providing a cathartic function and a rationalization of loss. This romantic discourse overtly contradicts dominant ideals of manliness and Islamic moral, yet can be publicly expressed because mediated into poetry. The remediation of this discourse via the mobile phone has produced a new poetic genre: the *risala*. By sending *risala* poems through mobile phones, the *qaba'il* establish a direct contact with women and shape a discourse of intimacy which can set the premises for future conjugal choices. The romantic discourse of the *risala* is thus generative and constitutes a motivation for action. The analysis of the link between *qasida*, *risala* and mobile phone demonstrates how 'new' media can refashion 'older' media, and how discrepant sets of emotions can be distributed in distinct discourses through different media.

Zakaria Rhani

Entre les esprits et les hommes : Amour, charme et possession au Maroc

Mon intérêt pour la question de l'amour part d'une expérience ethnographique particulière appréhendant les relations interspécifiques entre humains et esprits (jnun ou djinns) au Maroc. Parmi ces relations, les expériences d'amour sont, en effet, des plus importantes – s'y manifestent tous les signes de l'amour ou de son manque : désir, jalousie, passion, possession, plaisir, déplaisir, sexe, impuissance, mariage. La question fondamentale à laquelle je tenterai de répondre dans cette présentation est la suivante : que disent ces relations d'amour interspécifiques des relations d'amour entre les humains ?

Nico Staiti

Double possession, double inversion: l'histoire d'un couple de Meknès (Maroc)

*M'alle*m (*m'almin* pluriel, *m'almat* féminin pluriel) signifie littéralement «maître artisan». A Meknès *m'almat* est un terme qui se réfère aux femmes musiciennes professionnelles. Ce sont les principaux protagonistes de la partie féminine des rites de mariage et de transe. Les équipes de *m'almat* sont dans une position complexe entre marginalité et centralité. Ce sont en effet des groupes qui pourraient être appelés de « quasi confréries », formés par des femmes, auxquels participent aussi des musiciens et chanteurs masculins possédés par un esprit féminin, Malika. Ces officiants efféminés sont particulièrement qualifiés pour certains rites de passage. L'un d'eux, appelé ici Malik, est une personne qui s'est progressivement imposée, au

cours des dernières années comme l'un des principaux officiants des rites féminins à Meknès. De nombreuses femmes, même âgées et compétentes, reconnaissent l'autorité et la sagesse de Malik. Il a été capable de convertir sa faible position sociale et son malaise personnel en un instrument de puissance et d'affirmation de soi. Une jeune femme, appelée ici Aïcha, a été possédée en permanence par un puissant esprit juif nommé David, qui l'obligeait à fumer des cigares, à parler avec une voix d'homme, à s'habiller de façon masculine, et à fréquenter sexuellement des femmes uniquement. Ce comportement a été cause de troubles considérables. Lors d'un pèlerinage à Sidi Ali, elle a prié l'esprit Lalla Aïcha d'agir comme intermédiaire auprès de David, pour la libérer de son esclavage. Lalla Aïcha lui a dit d'aller à Meknès, où elle trouverait un mari. A Meknès, effectivement, au cours de rites pour Malika, elle s'est liée à Malik, qui était là pour jouer et officier les rituels. Pour cette contribution, l'accent est mis sur les dimensions matérielles des rôles de genre dans la façon dont elles reflètent l'influence des esprits et modulent les rapports amoureux.