

ethnographic parenthesis A }

Mutualities of Arriving

With this, I try to make transparent the processual nature of creating relationships and following everyday life in the High Atlas. Over time and in a respectful, curious, and caring way, I was accepted into a family life with an intensity and sincerity that overwhelmed me. Something I could have wished for, but which was at no point my own choice alone: a starting point to get to know the interdependence of locality, history as well as kinship and friendship relations.

When I arrived at the family I stayed with, I faced a problem that I had been theoretically aware of, but that now demanded a practical resolution: how was I supposed to establish rapport or to start creating relationships with people, when I was not yet able to speak the local language properly? I had been learning the Moroccan Arabic dialect (darija), but I had only a rudimentary knowledge of some Tamazight phrases. Making conversation and getting to know people for me meant asking about interests and biographical details. Getting to know one another also usually involves sharing stories about oneself and about one's personal views. This was not an option, not at the very beginning at least, without a broad language foundation. So, everyone became my teacher. As talking about complex topics or exchanging information was difficult, I mostly inquired about the meaning of words and tried to pronounce them correctly. I was cheered when I remembered typical phrases and used them at the right moment; on other occasions, I was encouraged to study harder when I could not say a word or phrase properly that I had already been taught. Quite self-explanatory, language and meaningful communication was an issue right from the start and most conversations revolved around language itself. To interact with other

people meant spending time together and creating a common experience, without navigating through conversation topics. The engagements rather fulfilled a social and relational purpose and in that reminded me of the interaction that Bronislaw Malinowski (1923) once coined “phatic communion”.

Getting an idea and a feeling for the place and people was a lengthy process. It involved many different people, situations and contexts. The children of the family were indispensable and amazing: they constantly told me stories, although I was not able to grasp all of them, they showed me their toys, shared their favourite songs and the homework they had to do for school. They took me on guided tours through the village, showed me their favourite spots, the family’s fields and walnut trees. Also, they were the ones laughing at me when I said something wrong or acted weirdly, for instance, when I did not make greetings properly or struggled to eat couscous with my hands. While they explained to me some card games, I showed them some magic tricks with the cards or made coins disappear. Altogether, these were some of the ways with which I tried to become and grasp part of everyday life, although still lacking essential language skills.

However, the process of getting to know the place and people was by all means not one-directional. In fact, especially the family I lived with, but not only them, watched and observed me closely, because they too wanted to get to know me and to learn who they were dealing with; to judge who and how I was as a person. During my first evening at the family’s house, obviously, all eyes were on me. We were having tea in the living room. Because I was sitting cross-legged on the floor that was covered with carpets and I did not stretch my legs in a more reclining position like the other men, I must have given the impression that I was a little tense, which I probably was. Pillows were handed to me, so that I could make myself more comfortable, which I did or at least tried. The atmosphere was cordial, yet I could also sense a certain nervousness among all those present. This was the very first instance, where I realised that the whole context and situation of ‘being there’ was not only new for me, but also and quite clearly for all the others; I was new. Consequently, the way I talked, interacted with the children, drank my tea, sat at the table or ate tajine were all subject to observation. Learning some recurring important phrases in Tamazight and doing greetings properly were the first essential steps in showing that I was learning and respecting conventions or customs. This also applied to encounters outside the family in the village. By using the proper greetings, with handshakes and salutations, I was able to demonstrate

that I was different from the occasional tourists coming through the valley. Later, this applied even more when it came to the ahidus.

The local dance of ahidus is an important part of Amazigh culture in the High Atlas that is performed during important festivities. Men and women dance collectively shoulder to shoulder in a huge circle. Each dancer moves and is moved by the others to polyrhythms of drumming and clapping. The songs usually take the form of call and response. One part of the crowd chants the first line, while the other are following call. The drums (agnza or talunt) are handmade from wood and goatskin. The participants of the dance usually bring their own instruments or join in without. The interplay of moving, singing and drumming constitutes a skillful performance that has to be learned carefully in resonance with the others. Altogether, it puts people in a rhythm and enables them to resonate with one another. As I was able to join in, properly dressed with a jelaba, and sing along with some of the songs, people that I had not really met before congratulated me amusedly for “knowing” or “having learned” the ahidus.

