

North Africa Falconry

Brief history

By : Chaouni Abdelhak

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Although at the time of the pharaonic civilization, the raptors (eagles/falcons...) were deified and venerated (mummies of falcons, sarcophagi), the falconry in North Africa has been practiced for the first time during the Arab conquest in the VIIIth century, the first Arab conquerors sent to their eastern leaders the falcons among the gifts.

As a part of the civilization of the tent, the big nomadic people of the world (Turku-Mongol of Asia, Arab of Arabia and Arab-Berbers of North Africa), were accompanied at all times by their faithful companions: horse, falcon/eagle, slougui, dromedary/camel, the latter being essential in nomadism .

In North Africa particularly in the Maghreb falcons and eagles were a part of nomadic life until the late of the XIXth century.

The Quran refers, in (the Surah 5) Al Maida (Section 4), to the animals of prey then all spiritual and theological aspects reserved for falconry in the Muslim world.

Quran /surah 5: al-Maida (section 4):

[THEY ASK YOU, WHAT IS ALLOWED TO THEM. SAY : ‘ALLOWED TO YOU ARE ALL CLEAN FOODS, AND AS TO THE ANIMALS OF PREY WHICH YOU HAVE TRAINED AS ALLAH HAS TAUGHT YOU, EAT OF WHAT THEY HAVE CAUGHT FOR YOU, AND MENTION THE NAME OF ALLAH OVER IT, AND FEAR ALLAH ; VERILY ALLAH IS SWIFT IN RECKONING.]

The division of property of nature is a right for every believer therefore; the falconry is not just for noble people.

The falconry was practiced, by the califes, sultans, emirs, dignitaries and passionate population generally (nomadic or semi nomadic).

The eastern Arab falconry has been spread in North Africa at the time of Umayyads (Magherb, Andalusia), the Abbasids (Tunisia), the Mamluk dynasty (Egypt) and during the setting up of the Arab tribes of the east, banou hilal and banou soulaim (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco) , these tribes have perpetuated the traditions of hunting while they were moving over because of climatic reasons, looking for pastures throughout the semi desert region in the north of Maghreb, they hunted game on horseback with falcons and eagles (especially in Morocco). The falconers of Maghreb hunted with Barbary falcon (in general), Peregrine falcon (sometimes) and the Sparrow hawk especially in Tunisia .

Often hunters were accompanied by the slougui working with falcons hunting hare (Morocco) .

Being considered as cavalier people and as a part of civilization of the tent, the nomadic population was favored by a large spaces abounding in game. It was both a way of distraction, physical exercises and dietary diversification.

Moroccan people excelled on eagles hunting, as an Oriental author of XXth century, practice disappeared in the earliest of the XXth century.

They hunted both in high and low flight: rabbit, gazelle, houbara, partridge, ganga, karawane.

Trade between the civilization of the tent were permanent, already in XIth century hunting techniques with eagles in Asia and North Africa (particularly in Morocco) were similar.

In Andalusia the praiseworthy of the falconry is evident in poems, proverbs, songs, manuscripts....

The decorative art of the pyxides and wooden boxes of Andalusia also reflects the passion for falconry. The falconers of the emirs in alhambra (Granada) were housed in a reserved area (Al baicin) near the castle.

The east current impregnate particularly Spain where the act of the great falconer (sahib al bayazira) had a big importance in the Xth century and where the court' poets showed more than once that they were familiar with hunting methods of the time.(Cf : Juan Vernet/What is the culture get as duty to the Arab of Spain).

And some Iberian treaties (Spanish, Portuguese) demonstrate this eastern impregnation. The arab influence appears in the lexicon of Roman works: the "Book of hunting " of Don Juan Manuel (1325), the "Book of hunting birds " of Pero Lopez de Ayala.

The falconry has always tempered some strained relations between Muslim and Christian states. And throughout the second millennium, sultans of Morocco had diplomatic exchanges with the kings of Europe (France, England, Spain, Sweden, Holland, Denmark, Austria, Sardinia, Naples, Portugal). And at the time of the Renaissance, the lure of the East intensified the exchanges between the two shores of the Mediterranean especially between Sicily and North Africa including Tunisia.

The falconry around the Mediterranean was prosperous and well developed, giving rise to several exchanges: both in practice, knowledge and diplomatic gifts (falcons, accessories ...) . The hubs are: Sicily and Andalusia where exchanges were very strong.

The falcons and accessories were among the most popular gifts in diplomatic exchanges. Thus in the XVIth century (1533), the king of France François Ith had sent to the Wattasside Moroccan sultan Ahmed Ben Mohamed, various objects of falconry: 30 gloves birds enriched with pearls, about 6 dozen of chaperones each adorned with pearls and other silk tassels. Many exchanges of falcons sand accessories took place between the princes of Orange of Netherlands and Moroccan sultans around the XVIIth century.

Also the Alaouite sultan Mohamed Ben Abdellah received in 789 from the King Frederick of Denmark some beautiful falcons.

The Barbary falcon was very appreciated by the majority of European courts.

At the end of the Middle Age, princes and masters of states (Este, Ferrar, Milan, ..) liked the oriental splendor.

The falcons were included as royalties and taxes, some tribes of the Doukkala region (Atlantic Morocco) gave falcons, as annual fees to the Portuguese counters installed in some coastline between the XVth and XVIIth century.

The Wattassid sultans and dignitaries of Maghreb in general, imported many falcons from Europe in the XVIIth century.

The literature of falconry was quite prolific in North Africa. In Egypt Mohamed Ibn Mangli In 1370 lists in a treaty everything about the art and techniques of hunting in the desert at the XIVth century, dedicated to sultan Mamluk Al Malek Al Ashraf (1362-1377).

The Moroccan master falconer Al Figuigui recounted in his treatise (1579),the advantages and the techniques of hunting and also the treatments and diseases of birds of prey, it was a reference book for all Maghreb falconers .

A long chapter has been reserved for falconry in the book "The Horses of the Sahara", prepared jointly by the Algerian emir Abdelkader and General Daumas in 1853 detailing all the aspects of hunting in general in the Algerian Sahara.

Some great falconers of Maghreb were distinguished at the international level: the Turkish bey Mohamed Lekbir of Eastern Algeria (1785), the caid Aissa Ben Omar (1863-1924) last aiglier of Maghreb and El Haj Said (Kwassem Doukkala / Morocco) last master falconer who hunted on horseback died in 1976.

To enhance the Moroccan falconry and evolve, El Haj Al Biyaz Smail (1921-2011) (son of secular master falconers), had created in 1983 the Moroccan Association of Al Noubala Falconers, and in order to climb it to an international standard, it had adhered to the IAF (International Association for Falconry), his efforts and devotion supported to the Moroccan falconry were rewarded with crowning of UNESCO recognizing Moroccan falconry as World Intangible Heritage.

And how are enriching information in hunting scenes of orientalist sculptors and painters: Eugene Fromentin, Mariano Bertuchi, Edward Doigneau, Marcel Debut ...