



## Sacred Performances

*M. E. Combs-Schilling*

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With penetrating insight Combs-Schilling illuminates the remarkable survival of one of the world's oldest monarchies, still ruling after 1200 years. The author unravels the paradox of this ancient yet progressive institution that has weathered invasion, economic collapse, and colonial assault. The pillars of stability for which political analysts typically search ? military strength, bureaucratic control, and commercial prosperity ? have often been absent in Morocco, sometimes for centuries. How then has the monarchy stood firm?

In this remarkable book, Combs-Schilling argues that the answer is to be found in the distinctive forms of ritual practice developed during times of great crises. Unique among Islamic governments, the Moroccan monarchy became central to the popular celebrations of the most sacred rituals of Islam, cloaking itself in their sanctity.

Combs-Schilling breaks new ground in thinking about ritual. The author explores the consequences of the replication and reinforcement of Morocco's national ceremonies in villages and homes and the metaphorical equivalence thereby built. The author outlines how ritual metaphors simultaneously fuse the monarchy with the hallowed prophets of Islam and the mundane structures of family life.

In elucidating the forcefulness of ritual embodiment the book challenges anthropological theory. It demonstrates that rituals created realities by inscribing them deeply within the individual's body and mind. Rituals use eros and physical substance to build imaginative abstractions. Performances of exquisite beauty and grace make the monarchy intrinsic to definitions of male and female, to experience of birth, intercourse, death, and to the ultimate longing to break death's bonds.

Combs-Schilling creates a model for national political analysis that takes meaning as well as strategic power into account. The author applies the anthropological analysis of rituals to new arenas ? the nation-state and the world political economy ? without ever losing sight of the individual and the flow of daily life. The book clarifies a distinctive form of nationalism that expands the boundaries articulated by Anderson in *Imagined Territories*. Rituals rather than territory or administration came to define the Moroccan monarchy and the Moroccan nation under Western assault, and enabled them to survive.

For the novice, the book provides an unusual and compelling entry into Islamic culture and history. Yet it is provocative for the expert in its reinterpretation of the strategic dimensions of Muhammad's marriages and the political potency of the rituals of Islam where power, sacrifice, and sexual identity converge.

By revealing the link between national ceremony and individual identity, the author calls into question the popular view that sharply divides East and West and suggests commonalities in the structures of political-sexual power that are built into societies that operate within the cultural contexts of the world's three monotheistic faiths: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

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