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Without Bounds

Yoram Bilu

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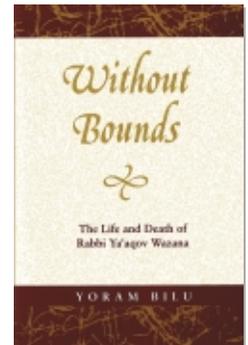
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Epilogue: Wazana's Afterlife

Postmodern anthropology is informed by a social reality in which the boundaries between the ethnographer and the informant are being systematically eroded: the "native" as an object of analysis may become an analyzing subject (Rosaldo 1989) and the "other" may appear as a critical reader of the ethnographic account (Clifford and Marcus 1986; and Marcus and Fischer 1986). Under these circumstances, anthropologists have become more attentive to the reverberations of their fieldwork and particularly ethnographic writing in the lives and the social world of the people they study. The growing sensitivity to the political and moral-ethical aspects of the impact of ethnographic accounts on the communities studied has given rise to a new genre of reflexive works in which the complex relations between fieldwork, text, and audience are thoroughly explored (see, for example, Blackman 1992; and Brettell 1993). The essays in Blackman's edited collection, designated "The Afterlife of the Life History," focus on the postpublication of what is written as life history. "Afterlife makes the point that the life history continues beyond the crystallization of the narrative into text to encompass audience response to the published work, reflections on its construction as text, as well as its impact on the lives of its narrator and collector" (Blackman 1992: 2).

Issues related to the afterlife of ethnographic accounts are particularly pertinent in Israel. On top of the fact that most Israeli anthropologists are studying their own society, the small size of the country, the relatively open avenues of communication, and the wide exposure to the same few mass media agencies—all create problems of involvement with which anthropologists working in remote milieus are less bothered. This epilogue, in which I narratively chart the afterlife of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana following the publication of the Hebrew version of my book on his life,

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sheds light on some of these problems of involvement. Moreover, beyond the ethical problems of the “politics of the life story,” amply discussed in Blackman’s collection, Wazana’s postpublication vicissitudes raise an intriguing epistemological question concerning the interplay between the ethnographic text and the reality it is supposed to represent.

My book in Hebrew on Wazana appeared in March 1993. Although it was published in a small number of copies by an academic press, it received relatively high media coverage. I believe that the concatenation of events that ensued was triggered by this media exposure (the credit for which should go to Wazana’s colorful and intriguing character), and particularly by two lengthy pieces that appeared simultaneously in the weekend supplements of the two leading Israeli dailies.¹ I found out that the book, no less than its protagonist, was a mediated object of knowledge. But this time the filters through which Wazana’s figure was conveyed to the public were newspaper and television reports in which his exotic and magical aspects were all the more accentuated.

In the beginning of April 1993, a thirty-five-year-old man named Yosef Waqnin² from the town of Be’er Sheva, an ex-barber who had recently gone back to study in a religious institution, called me at my office at the Hebrew University. Claiming that his parents had known Wazana in Morocco, he started to unfold, in a trembling voice burning with excitement, a series of dream encounters with the late rabbi-healer. While it is impossible to rule out the possibility that some of the dreams had preceded the publication, it became evident at the outset that the book, and particularly the attention drawn to it by the media, precipitated Yosef’s decision to “go public” with the nightly messages from Rabbi Ya’aqov. Needless to say, Yosef’s phone call engaged my attention instantaneously. In recent years I had studied the symbolic transfer of Jewish saints from Morocco to Israel and their reinstallation in the new country (Ben-Ari and Bilu 1987). This translocation was based on the spontaneous initiative of simple devotees of Moroccan background, men and women alike, who erected a shrine for a Maghrebi *tsaddiq* in their homes following an inspiring dream-series in which the saint urged them to do so.³ These dreams were usually promulgated as “Announcements to the Public” which they circulated among Moroccan-born Israelis. I designated these individual entrepreneurs “saint impresarios” in order to convey their relentless efforts to develop their shrines and increase their popularity. Much of my work with the saint impresarios centered on their personal narratives and life stories (see, for example, Bilu 1990; Bilu and Hasan-Rokem 1989). As articulated by the saint impresarios, these accounts, always concluding on a positive note with the saint’s apparition and the enduring liaison with him, are based on life events that pave the road for the transformative visitational dreams. Was I witnessing the emergence of a new saint impresario, whose vision to promote and “glorify” Rabbi

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Ya'aqov Wazana was triggered by my book? The undertaking seemed all the more intriguing given the antinomian character and deviant lifestyle of Rabbi Ya'aqov, the black sheep of the Wazana family, who abused the powers of his venerated forefathers. In life and death, Wazana could hardly be seen as a worthy candidate for wide-range enshrinement.

I suggested a meeting in Be'er Sheva so that I could record or write down verbatim Yosef's dream accounts. He wholeheartedly agreed, but said that to expedite matters, he would send me the written version of his nocturnal experiences with Wazana. One day later, a handwritten account six pages long of six dreams reached me through the department's fax machine. Only after I read the dream report did I start to realize the scope of Yosef's vision and my expected role in it: as Wazana's biographer (or, from Yosef's point of view, as Wazana's hagiographer), I was assigned the role of Yosef's confidante and adviser in his attempts to promote and give publicity to the name of the legendary but relatively unknown healer in Israel.

In the introduction to the dream accounts Yosef praises the greatness of Rabbi Ya'aqov and the holiness of his great forbears. Then he asks: "How did it turn out that precisely now, fifty-one years after the death of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana [in fact, only forty-one years had passed since Wazana's death], it was decided to erect this holy site which bears the name of these *tsaddiqim*?" In his answer, he highlights the miraculous cures that Wazana lavished on his family, but then moves on to give credit to my work:

Professor Yoram Bilu ... [here my academic title and position, as presented on the back cover of the book, are specified] traveled through the whole country in his attempts to inquire about the greatness of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana. And he found out that many were the people who had known Wazana and his miraculous achievements. This journey in the footsteps of Wazana he described in a book [titled] *The Life and Death of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana*. And he certainly deserves a credit for his wonderful work and commitment.

In an unmistakable allusion to Joseph, the great biblical dreamer, the dream series was titled "The Dreams of Yosef." It represents a coherent narrative sequence in which the drama of the multiple encounters with Wazana picks up until its final resolve. In the first dream report, Wazana reveals himself to Yosef and asks him to erect a site for him and his forefathers for celebrating their *hillulot*. The pattern of the reported nocturnal interactions between the dreamer and the healer that ensues is indistinguishable from that reported by other saint impresarios in describing their emergent alliance with their patron-*tsaddiq*. Like them, Yosef initially assumes an ambivalent, if not a reluctant, position, doubting his

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ability to pursue the calling imposed on him by Wazana. But the latter, like the saints in the dreams of the impresarios, gradually disarms Yosef of his resistance by showering him with messages of encouragement and promises for help.

In the sixth and last dream, dreamt also on Sabbath night, these affectionate gestures are transformed into specific instructions: “Yosef my son, my blessing on your head, count three days from today and go to the government’s [municipality] house. There someone will cross your way, and everything will turn all right.” The pursuit of these instructions shows how easily visitation dreams spill over to waking reality. After waiting a long time, Yosef prays for Wazana’s help, and, sure enough, he bumps into an acquaintance working in the municipality who is stunned to hear Yosef’s story. “The guy’s face turned white and he said to me, in tremor and amazement: ‘You should know that I didn’t mean to come here. I was drawn to you like a magnet; and on your right I saw a *tsaddiq* looking like an angel.’ He started describing the *tsaddiq* but I stopped him and asked: ‘Did the *tsaddiq* wear a white *jellaba* and a red *tarboosh* on his head? Was he holding a walking stick in his hand?’ ‘Yes,’ he replied, and the *tsaddiq* asked me three times: ‘help him, help him, help him.’”

As a result of this acquaintance’s intercession, Yosef finally got hold of a huge public shelter not far from his home. His account ends with “a passionate appeal to the public” to make contributions for remodeling the shelter and transforming it into a shrine. In subsequent phone calls he tried to recruit me too, begging me to look for potential patrons for the site in Israel and abroad.

I soon found out, however, that Yosef was concerned with “remodeling” Wazana’s figure no less than with remodeling the shelter. Our first meeting took place in Be’er Sheva at the end of May 1993, just a few days after I discussed Wazana in a literary program on Israeli television. Once again Wazana’s deviant character was in the spotlight, but this time Yosef could not disregard it. He was devastated by the idea that his idol, for whom he was seeking to establish a sacred site, was presented in the program as a deviant healer, partly Muslim and partly demonic. In his despair, he even suggested we eliminate all the copies of the book from the bookstores and write a revised version together, after gaining the proper rabbinical approval. He withdrew his suggestion only after I made it clear that it was precisely the subversive side of Wazana that made me write down his life story.

This was, in fact, our one and only confrontation. Still, Yosef could not resign himself to the unorthodox aspects of Wazana, and did all he could to decrease their salience. In his discourse, he was cautious not to mention Wazana’s name without juxtaposing it to his pious forebears, thus seeking to envelop him, as it were, in their saintly aura. When Wazana’s oddities nevertheless came to the fore he was adamant to remove

their sting by positive reframing. Thus he would often resort to mystical causes, presumably incomprehensible to ordinary people, in accounting for Wazana's alliance with the Muslims and the demons.

Yosef's efforts to deprive Wazana of his uniqueness and to recast him in the mold of a stereotypical Jewish Moroccan saint added a measure of unrelieved tension to our relations. Nevertheless, the dialogue between us could be maintained because it was based on a certain degree of symmetry, reciprocity, and interdependence. As a university professor keenly interested in the figure Yosef sought to idolize, I could serve as a source of legitimization and respectability for him in his efforts to popularize the new site.

But Yosef was no less important to my work, since I was determined to document and study the intriguing "resurrection" of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana which he initiated. To some extent, my professional career was dependent on Israelis of Moroccan background like Yosef—folk-healers, traditional patients, saint impresarios, and other devotees—whose knowledge, beliefs, visions, and misery I transformed into scholarly work. In the case of Wazana, the contribution to my academic standing that I took for granted was augmented by narcissistic gratification. The idea that my book was conducive to Wazana's reemergence in a saintly guise was so captivating that I was determined to investigate exhaustively the cultural phenomenon I had helped create. In a curiously symmetrical way, each of us managed to overcome or contain the problems posed by the other—for Yosef, the deviant aspects of Wazana emphasized in my book; for me, Yosef's attempt to replace these aspects with saintly ones—recognizing the potential contribution of the other to one's own goals.

The uneasy complicity between Yosef and myself was tested already on my first visit to Be'er Sheva. In fact, I scheduled the visit on the same day I was supposed to discuss my book on Wazana with students at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva. In doing this, I was well aware of the two levels of discourse, pertaining to different epistemological realms, that I juxtaposed, yet I was confident and even took delight in the fact that I could maneuver between the two readings of Wazana—as object of enshrinement and veneration and as object of skeptical inquiry. Unlike the protagonist of my book, with his shamanic power of bridging between worlds, I sought to compartmentalize the two realms of discourse. But Yosef interfered with my plan. When I tried to take my leave, after visiting the shelter-turned-into-a-shrine, he insisted that I should stay overnight at his place and I had to tell him about my other commitment. He immediately put forward his wish to join me and dismissed all my alarmed attempts to dissuade him from doing so. Even though I made it clear to Yosef that the students might be particularly interested in those aspects of Wazana's lifestyle he sought to silence, I felt quite insecure when we entered together the lecture hall where the meeting took place.

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Despite my apprehension, the evening was quite successful. Sitting quietly among the students, Yosef followed attentively my introductory remarks and the lively discussion that ensued (in which, as I expected, the bizarre side of Wazana was a central topic). Toward the end of the meeting one student raised the issue of relevance: is it possible that people living in Israel in the 1990s are still moved by Wazana? To answer the question, I invited Yosef to the podium, on the spur of the moment, to tell his story. Delighted to have the arena for himself, Yosef unfolded the sequence of events that led him to erect the shrine to the Wazana family. I was amazed by his articulate and poised performance, which left the audience speechless. For one enchanted moment the two realms of discourse mingled after all.

Elated by the impact he had had on the students, Yosef felt very grateful to me for giving him the opportunity to tell his story in a setting he considered very prestigious. Much later, I was puzzled to find out that he had recorded the whole affair on a small tape recorder which he carried in his bag. I do not know how, if at all, he used the recorded material, but the measure he had taken further reduced the traditional gap between ethnographer and informant. The prerogative assumed by the researcher to isolate and objectify data extracted from the other, rendering it amenable for processing and analysis, was thus seized and employed by that other.

My turn to use a tape recorder (and a video camera) came several weeks later, in mid-July 1993, when Yosef invited me to “the first *billula* of Rabbi Ya’aqov Wazana in Israel, commemorating his forty-first death anniversary,” at Yosef’s home in Be’er Sheva. Since some members of the Wazana family were also among the guests, I was a bit concerned about possible negative reactions to the book, but to my relief no one mentioned the anomalous aspects of Wazana. Moreover, from the compliments they bestowed on me for promulgating the life story of their kin, I came to the conclusion that not one of them had read the book. From my perspective, the high point of the modest, domestic *billula* was an ornate speech delivered by a local rabbi, a remote kin of Rabbi Ya’aqov and one of the most respected descendants of the Wazana family, which was sealed as follows: “Rabbi Ya’aqov Wazana has made many wonders in his lifetime and in the afterworld, but his greatest miracle was to make a distinguished professor at the Hebrew University write this book.”

Yosef also delivered a speech in which he elaborated on my association with Wazana. He deconstructed my name, Bilu, an acronym for the biblical verse *Beit Ya’aqov Lekhu Venelkha* (“House of Jacob, let us go”), as indicating my eagerness to go from house to house of would-be informants in pursuit of Rabbi Ya’aqov.

Note that in both speeches the two realms of discourse on Wazana were combined again, but this time it was the traditionally privileged

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social science perspective (Wazana as an object of investigation) which was appropriated and used to account for by the mystical perspective (Wazana as sainted figure). Of course, the process did not end here, since my ongoing attempts to document it constituted some form of reappropriation reflected, among other things, in this epilogue. The video camera, in particular, gave me an edge over Yosef. Operated by André Levy, a doctoral student of mine, it enabled me, by “freezing” the events of the *hillula*, to transform them into an objectified topic of study, amenable to multiple analyses and deconstructions. In subsequent months, however, Yosef added a video camera to the ever-more-advanced arsenal of tools he had been using in his attempts to promote his venture. The extent of his organizational efforts and sophistication became evident to me in the next public event he initiated for promoting the shrine, which took place in May 1994.

This time the celebration took place in a synagogue in Be'er Sheva. From the invitation to the occurrence I learned that the new shrine was designated the “Glory of the Ancestors—The Wazana Dynasty.” The gathering was depicted in the invitation as “An evening dedicated to the Torah” in which many religious functionaries and political figures, from the chief rabbi of Be'er Sheva to two deputy-mayors, were supposed to address the attendants. My name too appeared among the local dignitaries. I was surprised to find out that I was “a member of the presidential body of the Hebrew University,” and even more so that I was nominated “a member of the presidential body of [the sanctuary of] The Glory of the Ancestors—The Wazana Dynasty.” The symmetry between the two designations, and particularly their juxtaposition, were lucid demonstrations of how deeply engulfed I had become in the “sacred discourse” about Wazana which Yosef cultivated. Aside from my name, my attention was also drawn to an enigmatic statement in the invitation announcing that “the sacred book of the saint Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana will be presented in the synagogue.” I found it hard to believe that this is how Yosef would designate my book, but given the hyperbolic language of the invitation I could not (perhaps I did not want to) altogether deny that possibility.

The evening was well organized. Food and beverages were distributed to the 150 congregants, and a local band played popular religious music. An articulate master of ceremonies presented the speakers and a professional team of photographers, with all sorts of cameras including video, documented the affair, including the speech I was asked to deliver. André, my student and colleague, also videoed the event, and this dual documentation, in which each side was captured and filmed by the other side, further blurred the boundaries between reality and its representation. Realizing the delicacy of the situation, I decided to circumvent in my speech the issue of Wazana's oddities and limit myself to the genealogy

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of the Wazana family and the way in which I had collected the material for the book. I was well aware that in so doing I was acquiescing to Yosef's attempts to sanctify Wazana, but in the ceremonial atmosphere that prevailed I did not feel I could act otherwise. I comforted myself that my temporary "betrayal" of the protagonist of my book was a necessary price for maintaining the privilege to study a phenomenon I had inadvertently helped set in motion. Moreover, there was something exciting, though at times upsetting too, in documenting the very process into which I was drawn as a key participant.

Listening to the other speeches, I could witness once again how my academic involvement with Wazana was mobilized in the service of mythologically rearranging his figure. Thus, I was amazed to hear that my voyage in the footsteps of Wazana was conducted in the remote areas of the Atlas Mountains, where I withstood many a predicament, rather than in Israel. This way the voyage (and by implication the figure that propelled it) was made grander and more heroic. Another speaker informed the impressed audience that in seventeen universities throughout the world research on the Wazana family was currently being conducted! A common thread in many of the speeches was that my fascination with Wazana could not be incidental. Rather, it was mystically informed and ought to be taken as another indication of Wazana's great stature.

Yosef, respectfully designated "Rabbi Yosef" by the master of ceremonies, was the last of the speakers. After unfolding the concatenation of events that led him to erect the shrine, he came to the highlight of the evening. He related how, following clues he received from Wazana in a recent dream message, he was able to secure, after an arduous odyssey, one of the healer's enigmatic books. To appreciate the excitement that this disclosure stirred in the audience, it should be recalled that Wazana's former associates consistently pointed to his old, handwritten books, replete with magical incantations and esoteric formulae, as a major source of his power. However, most of them also contended that Wazana's few possessions, including these precious books, had all mysteriously disappeared after his sudden death (see chapter 14). Despite persistent rumors claiming that one or more of the books had found their way to Israel, no one admitted to having seen them.

Following the public auction of gigantic colorful candles designed to collect money for the shrine, an indispensable part of such celebrations, Yosef presented the book to the congregants. As far as I could see, it was indeed a genuine book of medicine, handwritten in the distinctive Judeo-Maghrebi discursive writing (Bilu 1978: 364). The unmistakably Jewish origin of the book was incongruent with the recurrent claim that Wazana had exclusively relied on Muslim traditions in his work, but the participants were not bothered with questions of authenticity. Bustling and swarming they congregated around Yosef, trying to touch

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the book in their hands and kiss it. It was clear that in their eyes the book, a sort of metonymic extension of the great healer, was endowed with great therapeutic powers that could be absorbed through physical contact. Having anticipated this enthusiastic response, Yosef circulated special forms among the congregants in which they were asked to write down the names of relatives and friends “to be blessed by the book of the saint.” This initiative proved very lucrative, as indicated by the pile of envelopes filled up with forms and money that was aggregated on the podium at the end of the evening.

The discovery of the book adds an ironic twist and a sense of narrative closure to the preparatory part of Wazana's resurrection. The symmetry of the two realms of discourse between which I was precariously navigating and which had been formerly manifested in parallel employment of documentation means (such as tape and video) had been extended to the domain of the text—formerly the cherished prerogative of the researcher. I could not escape the egocentric notion that the book of healing attributed to Wazana was brought to the fore, among other things, as a counterweight to my own book. The ethnographic writing, an initial booster but also a potential obstacle to the sanctification of Wazana, has been replaced with a sacred text, more suited to the folk-religious idioms of the believers. At the same time, the two books appear complementary rather than exclusive, as Wazana's afterlife trajectory, paved to some degree by my book, gained a remarkable boost following the discovery of ‘his’ healing book. With a devoted, indefatigable, and creative impresario like Yosef, with a shrine commemorating Wazana's and his ancestors' names, and with a book that contains his healing power—with all this Wazana was transformed, more than forty years after his death, from a deviant healer into a venerated *tsaddiq*.

Several years have passed since the first presentation of Wazana's healing book, but the plot of his afterlife (or, no less important, of his promulgated life story) is still being developed. During these years, Wazana's emissary, Yosef, has also been transformed. When we first met, I saw before me a small man with penetrating eyes, short unkempt beard, and black skullcap. Like many other North African newcomers in the 1950s and 1960s, his family was not spared of the predicaments of absorption into Israel. His father, a successful merchant in Morocco, had to find his living in Israel as a manual laborer. The family lived in a transit camp in Be'er Sheva before moving to a working-class neighborhood. Eleven years old when the family moved to Israel, Yosef drifted between various low-level educational institutions and later became a barber in Netivot. When Rabbi Ya'aqov started to appear in his dreams he was in his mid-thirties, married with three little children. While never entirely divorced from religion, he became more observant before the revelation and began open-ended study in a local yeshiva—a move that made his wife, a kindergarten's

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caretaker, the family's breadwinner. As a participant-observer in Yosef's undertaking, I saw him growing as his project expanded; but I missed the critical year—1995—in which his popularity began to soar, as I was out of the country on sabbatical. In that year Yosef made Wazana's healing book the cornerstone of his enterprise. Starting in Israel's urban periphery but later extending his visits to the main cities, he organized public meetings in synagogues, hotels, and private homes at which he told his story, solicited contributions for the shrine, and promoted Wazana's book as a panacea for all sorts of life problems. The surging popularity of the book, which he masterfully cultivated through local media avenues (radio, television, and newspapers), made Yosef a well-known healer.

After my return to Israel, Yosef invited me to watch videotapes documenting some of these public gatherings. Only then could I appreciate the change he had undergone. The audience gathered at these meetings waited for him for a long time, animated by music and stories of his spiritual stance and healing miracles. When his entrance was announced, he was called Rabbi Yosef Waqnin *Sblite* (an acronym for "May he live for many days and years"), the *tsaddiq* of Be'er Sheva. Escorted by two yeshiva students on each side, he would step in, and with his prayer shawl over his head and the holy book clenched in his hands, he was welcomed by the ululations of the older women. Many congregants would rush to him to kiss his hand and receive his blessing. I was amazed to find out that Wazana's hallowed status, which Yosef worked so hard to establish, was now enveloping Yosef himself.

The program of the gatherings was quite uniform. It would start with an introductory presentation by Yosef depicting Wazana's grandeur and therapeutic feats, then move to a festive meal punctuated by the public auction of colorful candles and pictures of saints, and end with a healing ritual focusing on the book. Yosef's rhetorical style and eloquence, which had impressed me in the past, became more pronounced by his new assets: confident authority, soft-spoken parlance, and tenderness and empathy in his interactions with the supplicants. I had to admit that he knew how to address people in need, how to listen to them and cheer them up. His appearance too had changed. With his beard full-grown and the prayer shawl wrapping his head and shoulders throughout the meeting he appeared now immersed in spirituality.

Despite my absence, I found that my place in Yosef's project had been maintained. In his talks, he continued to use my work to glorify the Wazanas, "a family that won the attention of scholars all over the world, headed by professor Yoram Bilu, my dear friend, who is now in the United States, presenting his work on Wazana in American universities." He told his audience that I have been working on this topic for the last twenty years, "dedicating days and nights to this sublime end, taking pride at the holy family, and about to finish a new book on this subject." I also found

that Yosef incorporated episodes from our encounters into his speeches. He described the presentation at Ben-Gurion University as follows: "I told this story [on a miraculous healing by Wazana] at Ben-Gurion University; a large audience, ordinarily removed from this domain, was present at my lecture. They remained there until late at night; and these are people engaged in research. They sat there and listened attentively. And it was all recorded. Professor Yoram Bilu, the chairman of the Hebrew University, who invited me to this lecture, was present too."

The climax of the meetings is when Yosef uses Wazana's book for blessing and healing. Altogether ignorant of the mystical procedures for diagnosis and healing specified by the book (which are based on elaborate word permutations and the writing of esoteric formulae), he has turned it into a magical object. For divination, the client is instructed to randomly open the book and look for any reference that could be associated with the problem. Healing is strictly mechanistic. After uttering a blessing, in which the names of Wazana and his ancestors are embedded, Yosef gently taps the client's forehead with the book. What renders this simple act therapeutic is the strong faith of the supplicants in the magical quality of the book and the good rapport Yosef establishes with them. Yosef's account of his recent success reflects his growing confidence and self-appreciation: "I talk [to the clients] from heart to heart, no connection whatsoever to religion, no coercion, in a gracious and open way. I am using my knowledge in a tolerant, prudent manner. I don't know how to call it, perhaps it's psychology. But it works!" Judging from the videotapes of the gathering I was watching, this self-characterization is not groundless.

The basis for Yosef's growing popularity has not gone unchallenged. Members of the Wazana family in Israel, and particularly the children of Rabbi Ya'aqov's blind cousin Shaul, view him as a usurper encroaching on their turf and depriving them of their *zekhut avot* (cf. Marcus 1985). In the *hillulot* of Rabbi Avraham el-Kebir, the founder of the dynasty, celebrated in Natanya, the Wazanas emphasize their exclusive right to the saint's blessing and smear and vilify Yosef's enterprise. Their malicious defamation does not seem to affect Yosef's popularity, however, since the book in his possession that ostensibly encapsulates Wazana's bliss keeps drawing large numbers of people to his gatherings. Rather than attacking his vilifiers, Yosef fosters a subdued and magnanimous stance, showing his appreciation and respect for the Wazana offspring. But at the same time, he uses my book to highlight the disparaging view that many of Rabbi Ya'aqov's kin took of his deviant lifestyle. In contrast, Yosef's own family in the Western High Atlas took good care of the healer until his last day and thus obtained the right to enjoy his blessing. He justifies the "expansionist" designation of his project (the "Glory of the Ancestors—The Wazana dynasty") by asserting that the title merely refers to the family line of Assarag. Rather than the great founder of the Wazana

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dynasty, Rabbi Avraham in this line is Ya'aqov Wazana's father, a *tsaddiq* without heirs.

In a further attempt to mitigate his image as usurper, Yosef started to claim recently that his family and Rabbi Ya'aqov's became related through intermarriage. Judging from his relentless efforts to transform the deviant healer into a popular *tsaddiq*, he may indeed be seen as a spiritual heir of Wazana. That he genuinely views himself as the inheritor of Rabbi Ya'aqov's blessing becomes apparent from the way he describes their critical encounter in the fifth visitational dream that sealed their alliance: "In the dream he [Wazana] put up his stick. He told me: 'hold this stick.' He drew me to him, covered me with this mantle, and started to pray and bless me with holy names. His hug made me happy and joyful. He kept blessing me: 'go on, go on, you will prevail, I will always be on your side.' I felt that his power had penetrated my body, that I was not the same Yosi [nickname for Yosef] Waqnin anymore." Yosef's moment of initiation is presented as a classic conversion in that the *tsaddiq's* special power enters his body and irrevocably changes his identity.

In the fourth visitational dream Rabbi Ya'aqov explicitly assured Yosef: "I hereby submit to you all the powers of my forebears and me." This transmission, repeatedly announced by Yosef in his public meetings, indicates that the apprehension of the Wazanas is not unfounded. Notwithstanding Yosef's conciliatory approach toward them, in traditional Morocco the blessing or *zekhut* of the family was viewed as a limited good that cannot be replenished when expropriated by a contender (see Bilu 1988). If indeed Yosef identifies himself in fantasy with the biblical Joseph, this ascription may include the latter's descent. Since Joseph's father was no other than Jacob (Ya'aqov) the patriarch, Rabbi Ya'aqov's opening remark in the last visitational dream—"Yosef *my son*, my blessing on your head"—is not so metaphorical. It is possible that this dream blessing was modeled on the biblical prototype of Jacob's blessing to Joseph and his sons, which was granted "on their head" (Genesis 48: 14–18).⁴

The story of Rabbi Ya'aqov's afterlife is still being developed. Yosef's project is quickly expanding. The institutions of the "Glory of the Ancestors—the Holy Wazana Dynasty" now boat a yeshiva and *beit midrash* (religious school), separate Torah classes for men and women, and a welfare foundation for helping the needy. The institutionalization of the charisma is manifested, among other things, in a call for the monthly contribution, using automatic deposit, to the bank account of the "Glory of the Ancestors"; in distributing registration forms for blessings; and in holiday parties for women organized by Yosef's wife. A nice illustration of "the holy book" adorns all the forms, letter sheets, and envelopes of the institutions. The last expansion of the "Glory of the Ancestors" is a

matchmaking agency headed by Yosef and an energetic aide, designated "general manager."

The close associations Yosef was able to forge with journalists in Be'er Sheva propagated a salvo of items praising his achievements in newspapers in southern Israel, with titles such "The Miracle Maker," "The Holy Book of Rabbi Ya'aqov," "The Wonders of Rabbi Yosef Waqnin," and "The Cat-Scanner of Be'er Sheva."⁵ Excerpts from "The Cat-Scanner of Be'er Sheva" illustrate the enterprising self-marketing of the ex-barber turned "*tsaddiq* of Be'er Sheva" (cf. Weingrod 1990).

Rabbi Yosef Waqnin *Sblite* takes over Be'er Sheva and its periphery, particularly Shderot and Netivot. Those who know Rabbi Waqnin hasten to dub him "The Cat-Scanner of Be'er Sheva" because of the amazing skills of diagnosis and consultation that this modest rabbi exhibits. I heard many stories from people who were miraculously helped by the Cat Scanner. Examples are endless: cancer cured, marriage affirmed against all odds, marital discord turned into harmony. Businessmen report positive changes in their activities, following the Rabbi's famous blessing for business, given in a special atmosphere of kindness and peacefulness.... Thousands and tens of thousands of women report an amazing improvement in their lives following the Rabbi's renowned blessing that gained recognition in Israel and the world. An article in a local communication media described the rabbi as a miracle maker of unusual stature; he simply entreats the holy book, and the latter complies. Soon the rabbi will star on the front page of a national daily and in several radio programs which will expose him to the entire population. Hence, our tip to you is: hurry to the Cat Scanner and get his blessing at once. I promise you: You will come back stunned.

To sum up, the vicissitudes of Wazana's afterlife—how Yosi Waqnin became Rabbi Yosef Waqnin *Sblite*, the Saint of Be'er Sheva, and how I became unwittingly involved in the process—points to the undermining of the authority of "ethnographic realism" (Marcus and Cushman 1982) in three areas. The "natives" as an object of analysis may become analyzing subjects, capable of manipulating the ethnographer to their ends (Rosaldo 1989); the ethnographer is not a detached observer, dissociated from the process of knowledge production; and, most pertinent to this case study, the ethnographic text might have strong impact on the community studied (cf. Blackman 1992; Brettell 1993). When the researcher keeps studying this impact, and the subjects keep responding to his presence in the field, the ethnographic arena turns into a hall of mirrors. The blurred

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images reflected in these mirrors stand for a postmodern ethnographic reality: kaleidoscopic, elusive, and constituted by its own documentation. In the narrative sequence I depicted, the moment most emblematic of this complex reality occurred in the celebration in Be'er Sheva when both sides, researcher and subjects, stabilized and framed each other with their video cameras. Fixating the observer in the lenses of the observed reflects the narrowing of the gap between "modern" and "traditional." The "traditional" subject, using advanced technology, attempts to appropriate the so-called scholarly product of the researcher and bask in its prestige. The researcher reacts by drawing away, resorting to a "postmodern" discourse, replete with contradictions and self-irony.

This process of distancing highlights the fact that the boundaries between Yosef and myself were blurred but not entirely dissolved. Our preliminary mutual enthusiasm was later tinged with ambivalence and reservations, but we learned to cooperate and benefit from each other, neutralizing controversies and suspending incompatible expectations. Yosef's gains from our interaction were obvious. First, my book served as a trigger, if not as a source of inspiration, for his project. Second, he knew how to transform my interest in Wazana and his afterlife into resources of legitimacy and prestige. This he did by a major input of selection and processing which entailed excluding any extra-cultural analysis of Wazana offered by the book, denying the antinomian aspects in his makeup, highlighting his miraculous and healing feats, and augmenting them with features common to the stereotypical image of Maghrebi *tsaddiqim*.

My main gain from the awkward interaction with Yosef, very gratifying at certain moments but no less embarrassing at others, was the opportunity to convert it into some sort of professional good, including this epilogue. Needless to say, the monopoly I retained over the writing of this chapter significantly curtails the symmetry between researcher and subject I highlighted earlier. Yosef was not partner to the writing, his identity was disguised, and the emerging narrative of Wazana's afterlife represents my interpretation of the unfolding events. As in traditional ethnographic writing, the authority and "voice" remain mine. Note, however, that the textual representation of reality is but a partial and limited province of meaning within it. As made clear before, Yosef generated many arenas of self-presentation where his "voice" and interpretations loomed high. In the last analysis, it was his ability to appropriate the ethnographic text and to use it to his ends, in other words, "to tell me," which propelled me to add this epilogue about Wazana's afterlife.

From a credulous perspective grounded in the discourse common in Yosef's arenas of action, it is not difficult to show that the concatenation of all events in Wazana's afterlife constitutes further evidence of the legendary healer's endless powers. More than forty years after his death, this energy seems to activate the researcher no less than Wazana's

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former acquaintances and new followers. Given my skeptical point of view, this perspective is presented with a modicum of irony. But in a very serious vein we may conclude that what started as an attempt to document and present a dynamic reality evolved into an intricate interaction, epistemologically precarious, in which the ethnographic work became a building block in constituting this reality. In this process I have unwittingly become a popularizer and propagator of Wazana—an impresario of saint impresarios.

