

A PAPER PRESENTATION

Choreographic strategies in *Apocrifu* (2008) as a distrust of religious discourse

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Belgian dance theatre choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's oeuvre re-evaluates identity construction, language and culture in the postcolonial world. This presentation will present a reading of a brief section of his work *Apocrifu* (2008), as a critique of religious discourse. Without discussing the work in its entirety, quick access to its dramaturgical content can be gained through analysis of the use of props and the work's title. Throughout the work a large number of leather bound books are moved and manipulated in a variety of metaphorical acts. Cherkaoui uses the books as stepping stones to create a path, but the books-as-stepping-stones seem to only allow him to go to a certain point and no further. Later, he dances a solo where he elevates a book above his head in awe, but then it comes down, crushing his face, so that he cannot see where he is going. At the end of the performance, Cherkaoui, and fellow performers Dimitri Jourde and Yasuyuki Shuto each pierce a book with a sword, suggesting an act of renunciation of the written word.

The title of the work refers to the Apocrypha, which can be defined as those Christian writings that were excluded from the canons of the Old and New Testament. The distinction between the Apocryphal as opposed to the Canonical gospels is believed to have led to the word 'apocryphal' taking on meaning such as 'unauthentic, spurious [...] fictitious, [...] invented or imagined rather than true or genuine' or implying 'a mysterious or extremely dubious source of origin'. These negative, derogatory connotations denote an attitude that fails to take into account the values of the texts themselves and the subjective and arbitrary processes involved in the creation of the distinction between Apocrypha and Canon. This seems, to theological scholar Helmut Koester (1980), largely misplaced. The title *Apocrifu* sets the scene for Cherkaoui's dramaturgical concerns in this work, namely the processes and stakes involved in writing the canonical religious texts and the implications of their elevation for the religion's followers, which, it is implicitly suggested, may lead to religious fundamentalism. In a broader sense, this theme resonates with Cherkaoui's historiographical distrust of the written word and his renunciation of the idea of cultures as discrete, pure and impenetrable.

Cherkaoui, Jourde and Shuto are each holding a leather-bound book: the Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an, the holy books of three historically linked world religions. The three books are passed between them. Cherkaoui randomly opens his book and the other two men hold their open books next to his in order to compare them. They move so that they are standing behind one another with their books held high one behind the other, so that it looks like a unified image of a single man holding up a book. As the men go through the same motions of lowering the book and folding it across their chest, there are some slight delays and accelerations, so that the image multiplies, evoking the iconography of Shiva. Non-matching pairs of hands grab hold of the books and open them. Torsos lean from side to side allowing for the men to scrutinise, flick through and skim read all three books. The loops of non-matching arms weave in and out of each other, like a magician's trick, so that no one knows which book belonged to whom anymore.

Cherkaoui recites a speech by Reverend Jay Smith, a researcher into the sources of the scriptures of the Bible and the Qur'an, which was taken from a video clip on YouTube, bluntly entitled 'Is the Qur'an corrupted? Biblical characters in the Qur'an', and then memorised and choreographed. The speech highlights the intertextual connections between the two holy texts and editorial amendments made when the texts were reproduced throughout the centuries. Smith's aim is to undermine fundamentalist readings of the Qur'an as 'the word of God'. Instead, he argues that the text has its origins in Jewish Talmudic and Christian Apocryphal writings. Cherkaoui, too, seems deeply suspicious of religious fundamentalism, and choreographs the intertextuality of the Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an in the trio for three male dancers described earlier.

In the YouTube clip, Smith talks at an extraordinarily quick pace, and this is mimicked by Cherkaoui, who sometimes struggles and needs to pause to breathe or swallow. During the recounting of the text Jourde and Shuto make comical interventions into the text. When Cherkaoui says 'I always scratch my head', Shuto scratches Cherkaoui's head. When Cherkaoui mentions the story of Cain and Abel, Jourde mimics stabbing Shuto. The three men recite the phrase, 'He who takes the blood of one, takes the bloods of all, and he who saves the blood of one, saves the bloods of all' in unison, gazing at the audience in bewilderment. When Smith in the YouTube film makes a mistake and mixes up the centuries, this is translated in the choreography as Shuto interrupting Cherkaoui and correcting him. When the speech uses the rhetorical device of posing the question, 'Now what does that tell you?' followed by a pregnant pause, Cherkaoui pauses and suspiciously moves his eyes from side to side, while Jourde holds his book in front of his nose and mouth so that only his eyes are visible, which he, too, moves from side to side.

The key point Smith makes in this text is that these religious texts are in fact man-made and subject to error in copying, and indeed to editorial revisions. Smith published the same research in a more scholarly written online article entitled, 'Is the Qur'an the Word of God?' on the debate.org website, which is owned by the Hyde

Park Christian Fellowship, ‘an informal network of Christian researchers in the UK, whose primary interest is the academic study of all issues relevant to Islam and Christianity’. It is problematic, although perhaps not deliberate, that the majority of texts published on the website are by Western, non-Muslim writers, with a great many by Smith alone, rendering it primarily a representation of Islam through Western eyes. An underlying ethnocentric agenda of critiquing the way in which some Muslims read their holy text as the word of God can also be felt. While for a Christian this may be an understandable entry into civilised debate with Islam, it is inappropriate because it superimposes a Western, post-Enlightenment, moderate approach to religious texts and therefore fails to understand the role of the Qur’an from within Islam. This is in line with Arjun Appadurai’s term ‘ideoscapes’, which indicates that the ideology and world view of the Enlightenment have undergone a worldwide diaspora, but have become detached from the internal logic of its original context. Hence, this Western ideology has been appropriated incompletely, and become lost in translation. Therefore, Appadurai seems to allude to the limitations of a continued use of this set of ideas as ‘correct’.

Nevertheless, Cherkaoui may have selected to cite this text in *Apocrifu* precisely because it undermines the power and supremacy of the written religious word. Smith contends that his critical analysis of the evidence of man-made interventions in the text of the Qur’an seems to ‘point away from a divine authorship and point towards a more plausible explanation; that the Qur’an is simply a collection of disparate sources borrowed from surrounding pieces of literature, folk tales, and oral traditions’. This seems to be a message that Cherkaoui can subscribe to, although at the same time he implicitly keeps his distance from Smith’s other possible agendas and ethnocentric bias by using, not his own, but Smith’s words, by mimicking Smith’s pace of speech, which adds to a strangely comical effect in his reciting of the text, and by choreographing the other two performers’ comical interventions.

The availability of Smith’s speech on YouTube needs to be evaluated critically. On the one hand, it could be considered beneficial to encourage debate between Christians and Muslims using such a popular medium. On the other hand, because YouTube is a medium which is relatively unedited and users are able to comment relatively freely, any such debates occur in a vacuum, are rarely constructive, and border on hate speech. A survey of the user comments of the last years, since the clip was posted in November 2006, indicates that Smith’s video evoked many heated responses by users representing different religions and ideologies. The relative anonymity of the users allows for fairly injurious language. Sometimes the hate speech is directed at Smith, sometimes at other users, and sometimes at no one in particular. Often the comments bear no relation to Smith’s argument and slip into a religious fundamentalism, which is precisely what he was arguing against. This illustrates that the premise of Western, post-Enlightenment scholarship is no longer viable in an increasingly globalised world, or a ‘modernity at large’ in the Appadurain sense, where people have free and unmediated access to information, opinions and debate and in principle everyone has a right to voice their own opinion.

In the YouTube context, where notions of subject and object are problematized, and website officials merely use an automatized system to identify offensive language, there is scope for hate speech to be uttered relatively uncensored. In Butler's *Excitable Speech* discussing 'linguistic vulnerability' and 'injurious speech', her overall argument is that it is impossible to regulate hate speech through censorship, precisely because this assumes a universal notion of what is acceptable. Instead she argues that language is politically and socially useful, precisely to the extent that it is excitable, or out of control, in play, performative, act-like. Butler's writing practice tends to resignify language, by presenting it in a new light. Similarly, Cherkaoui's appropriation of Smith's discourse can be seen as a resignification, in the sense that Cherkaoui 'playfully' keeps his distance from Smith's apparent ethnocentric agenda and association with online hate speech, which ensues from this kind of unmonitored digital religious discourse.

This resignification of Smith's speech opens up renewed possibility for reflection and debate, but on Cherkaoui's own terms and in his own artistic language. He selects a piece of the text that he, as a postcolonial figure, can subscribe to and which works in the overall dramaturgy of *Apocrifu*, i.e. Smith's critique of the elevation of canonical religious texts by these religions' followers. However, Cherkaoui subjects the text to postmodern distancing strategies, and thereby distances himself from Smith's ethnocentric bias and the ensuing online hate speech.