At the beginning of the 21st century, the Medina of Marrakesh is facing significant changes. The old town had been isolated and preserved by the French protectorate policy during the first half of the 1900s. After the withdrawal of the colonial power, the former incarnation of Muslim cultural life declined to a residential area for the poorest rural population.

During the sixties, individual members of a growing gay community settled Marrakesh. In the 1980s, UNESCO acknowledged the exotic attractiveness and the cultural significance of the ‘oriental Medina’ of Marrakesh by including the town in the world’s cultural heritage programme, and the characteristics of the Medina also attract the international mass tourism today. Helped by the structural condition of globalization, numerous western foreigners had moved into the old town by the end of the 20th century. All forms of media, first and foremost the Internet, offer real estate for rent and for sale in many quarters of the old part of Marrakesh. In the Medina, the growing group of western foreigners live excessively on a grand scale together with the increasingly impoverished Moroccans. Does all this speak for symptoms of neo-colonialism? Or, due to the fact that well-off foreigners contribute to the renovation and preservation of the fabric of the buildings, does it rather indicate gentrification?

20th-century town planning

The policy of Governor Lyautey and his chief architect Prost during the time of the protectorate helped to spatially isolate the old towns along with all other old buildings. This did not only include the preservation and protection of the historic old towns, but also the building of modern European towns, so-called villes nouvelles, at a distance from the old towns. After the end of the French protectorate in 1956, the Moroccan upper middle class left the old town, and a poor rural population spread into the Medina. The 60s, international tourism had already discovered the old towns along with all other cities of cultural interest in the world. UNESCO took the cultural significance of the Medina into account by including it into the world’s cultural heritage programme in 1985. However, the town-planning restoration measures were restricted at first to individual buildings and to the paving of the most important streets of the old town.

Western foreigners in the Medina of Marrakesh

During the 60s and 70s, the process of de-colonization took place comparatively peacefully in Morocco. Foreigners and real estate agents are offering hundreds of riads on the market. French Moroccan estate agents pursue aggressive marketing strategies, which range from face to face contact on the Jemaa el-Fna to interactive communication on the Internet. Western foreigners also use the city to bring a lot of money to Morocco. It employs hundreds of Moroccan workers, and so part is very, very good. These observations cannot be contradicted if one applies them exclusively to the fabric of the buildings and to the financial input. Similar to the economically and socially declined districts of industrial countries, those districts of Morocco which seem to be left to socio-economic ruin are structurally saved and revalued by the wealthy population. In addition, another way of life is being established in the district: gentrification in the ‘oriental town’ – indeed in the ‘oriental town’ because the houses, apart from some exceptions, are designed in the ‘oriental’ style that shaped the image 19th-century European Mediterranean. Thus, a hybrid atmosphere was created with an imaginary orient and a supposedly ‘traditional’ one, which consciously contrasted the poverty of the surroundings. This contrast, which is manifest especially in the availability of services in houses, hotels, and restaurants, adds to the fact that western foreigners feel they live in a ‘sort of gracious colonial atmosphere’, as Mr Willis says.

Depending on what perspective is taken, the process of change in the Medina of Marrakesh either proves to be gentrification, which is evaluated positively because it helps preserve the picturesque fabric of the buildings rich in tradition, or it represents neo-colonialism, which uses the product of Islamic culture to meet the expectations of the European settlers. One should note, in this context the origin of the imagination ‘orient’, as Mary Anne Stevens outlines: ‘Between 1798 and 1814, North Africa and the Near East, as a closest non-Christian region to Europe, exercised a fascination upon the West, which responded in a variety of ways: the depiction and description of ancient civilizations and of contemporary cultures, imaginary evocations in poems and novels, literary descriptions and tourists’ enthusiasm, as well as representations by artists.’ More than a hundred years after the Europeans created the image of the ‘Orient’, they now once and for all (peacefully) start to redesign their ‘Oriental’, i.e. the old towns of Morocco, structurally and ideologically according to their imagination. They do that from the inside, where the Islamic urban way of life, the ‘um-mān hádā’, is rooted.