

# Al Hajja Mehdia: A Twentieth Century European Gnostic

By Jane Casewit

**A**lthough little known in the Anglophone world, Catherine Delorme, also lovingly known as *Al Hajja Mehdia* or *Mamita*, was proclaimed by the Sufi orders in Morocco of the mid-twentieth century as an *Arif-bi-Llab*, or 'Knower of God.' She was also considered a *Wali Allah*, or 'Friend of God' as well as an advisor and guide for many spiritual seekers in Europe and North Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Having attained spiritual realization as well as being blessed from an early age with insight into individual souls and the gift of healing, Mamita was considered an inheritor of the teachings and legacy of the Darqawiyya /Alawiyya Sufi order. Towards the end of her life, at the behest of her disciples in Rabat, Morocco, Mamita wrote a detailed autobiography of her extraordinary life, entitled *Le Chemin de Dieu*, or *The Path to God*, not yet available in English. Not only does the book relate incidents pointing to a destiny of spiritual struggle, insights and heights, but it also vividly describes life in North Africa, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco for Europeans during the French occupation of those countries and demonstrates how separate their lives were from that of the native Muslim and Jewish populations. Despite the disparity of the two worlds, there were a few serious seekers of truth amongst the Europeans and most of them, having read the works of René Guénon, gravitated to Mamita who gave them spiritual counsel and introduced them to the spiritual luminaries of the era in Morocco and Algeria. Vivid descriptions of the great masters of that region make the book valuable for its insights into the sanctifying presence of the *shuyukh* of the age, such as the Shaykh

Tādīlī, Shaykh Adda Ben Tunis and other holy people living under what was then the French occupation.

Catherine Delorme was born into a Sicilian family in Sicily at the turn of the twentieth century. When she and her sister were young, her father, a talented sculptor and ambitious entrepreneur, emigrated with his family to the then French colony of Algeria. Many Italians and other southern Europeans in the early twentieth century were flocking to North Africa seeking economic opportunities not found in southern Europe at the time. Catherine's parents were pious Roman Catholics and ensured that their daughters had a strict religious upbringing in a stable family setting. Catherine inherited her father's artistic talents, and as a young child spent hours drawing fairies, angels, princesses and figures of the Christ child. As she grew into adolescence, she often daydreamed and lived in other worlds, far from the activities of the worldly European colonists who surrounded her. Profoundly pious from her earliest years and educated in a Catholic school, she had a great love of beauty, a strong sense of justice and deep compassion for her fellow human beings. She always felt estranged from the European *piéd noir*<sup>1</sup> society of the time and sought the company of nomads, gypsies and native Muslim families. Her alienation from the European culture of colonial North Africa and even her own family was reinforced by the blessing of extraordinary dreams and inner callings which increased her desire to find her 'real homeland,' as she described it. Often anguished in her yearning to escape the world and seek truth, especially during World War I when the atrocities she learnt about crushed her soul, she was from time to time reassured by an inner voice that she would eventually find her Way to the Divine, although not without struggle and hardship.

Mamita married a French doctor at a young age, thus acquiring French nationality and developed an extraordinary ability of expression in the language of Gaul. She began her personal spiritual quest in earnest after her marriage, despite having to hide her yearnings and prayers from her husband whilst continuing to be a faithful, serving wife and participating in the inevitable social obligations of her husband's status. She explains that despite their differences, the marriage provided her with stability, space and happiness and most of all the freedom to

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<sup>1</sup> Literally « black foot », a term used to refer to French citizens who settled in French North African colonies, usually Algeria.

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