

Traditions of the Atlas Jews in Morocco through the Memoirs of British travellers before the protectorate (Wedding, Circumcision and Funeral rites as an example)

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ABSTRACT:

The Jewish community in the cities and villages of the Atlas Mountains is considered one of the oldest human settlements in Morocco. Despite the multiplicity of historical narratives, both Moroccan and foreign, regarding its historical roots in the country, they intersect on the idea of Jews settling there during the ancient historical periods preceding the birth of Christ. Since then, it has integrated with the local population, which prepared the ground for them to freely practice their socio-religious rituals and economic activities, and also allowed them to monopolize the trade sector for certain objective reasons. Thanks to the tolerant policy enacted by Moroccan sultans towards the Jewish component, successive waves of Jews from Western European countries and the Arab East flocked to Morocco, with a significant number of them choosing the cities and villages of the Atlas Mountains as their homes. This community was characterized by a blend of foreign and local features in a complex way, as they combined their original traditions and customs with the customs and culture of the host country. This blend has made them, over the years, a unique Moroccan cultural component. This study attempts to shed light on some of the customs and traditions, such as wedding rituals, circumcision, and funerals, of this distinct Jewish community that has not been studied, at least by Moroccan researchers, but is based mainly on the memoirs of British travelers who visited Morocco before the French protectorate.

Keywords: Atlas Jews, Morocco, Wedding, Circumcision, Funeral.

1- INTRODUCTION:

Undoubtedly, researching the subject of the Jews in Morocco, especially those in the Atlas Mountains, presents a genuine adventure for the researcher in history. Given the scarcity of Moroccan studies and research that have dealt with the subject on the one hand, and the extreme complexity that characterizes the phenomenon of minorities in Morocco, on the other hand, the information contained in The British archives regarding Jewish groups up to the year 1856 AD was often scarce, occasional, and superficial. In most cases, it held only secondary or circumstantial importance at best (E-Saghir 2016, 161). The research becomes more complex when focusing on the Jews of the Atlas Mountains, who have received less attention in terms of study and research and have had fewer privileges compared to the Jewish community in the coastal cities (Miège 1962, 562). With the exception of the books written by foreign travelers who visited Morocco during the period before the French protectorate, sent by their governments to study the various aspects of Moroccan society, as well as the country's economic, political, and military structures on the horizon for colonization, -to the best of our knowledge- there are no substantial studies by Moroccan or foreign authors on the history of this unique

Jewish community, its traditions, social life, and cultural practices. Consequently, travel studies and colonial research stand as the most reliable historical sources for understanding the history of this community.

Throughout history, the Jews of Morocco constituted the country's sole non-Muslim religious and ethnic minority. They intermingled with the Arab and Berber Muslim population and settled in separate areas that covered almost the entire Moroccan territory, with their numbers surpassing those of Jews in other North African countries (Abdel Rahman Bashir 2014, 48). In fact, they formed the largest Jewish group in the entire Arab world (Bouslam Muhammad 2014, 204). In addition to the traditional jobs in the fields of money, commercial transactions of various types, both internal and external, crafts, and interactions in the agricultural sector, the Jews were distinguished by their integration into Moroccan society as one of its many components. They were also characterized by their immersion in the prevailing culture in the cities and villages, and by their significant contribution to enriching the country's cultural heritage (Kenbib 1998, 17). Due to the scarcity of historical research and studies on the Jewish community's history in the cities and villages of the Atlas Mountains, and recognizing the paramount importance of researching its historical, social, cultural, and religious circumstances, we have chosen to dedicate this study to exploring this community. Our focus will be on the most prominent aspects of culture, religion, and society, specifically the wedding, circumcision, and funeral rituals. This study primarily relies on the memoirs of British travelers, supplemented by local and Jewish writings during historical data gaps.

2- Marriage rituals

Wedding rituals and ceremonies among the Jews of the Atlas are characterized by a special character and are of great importance. They are often accompanied by rhythmic songs, creating a sequence of joyful moments. These celebrations reach their climax on one of the days of Wednesday, which is considered the «Day of the Seven Blessings». On this day, a ritual known as the «Thousand and One Operations» is performed. The celebrations typically last for three to four weeks, or at least eight days. The level of brilliance, extravagance, and splendor varies depending on the capabilities and desires of the participating families (Zafrani 1987, 82). The ceremonies begin with what is called «the day of the white party», which is the day when the bride-to-be wears a white piece of clothing (the day of the white piece of clothing). On this day, cheerful women gather at the fiancé's house, taking a tray filled with sugar pills and a plate of Henna. They then help the fiancée put on her wedding attire and apply henna to her hands. Her head is adorned with henna, and it is wrapped with white fabric, symbolizing optimism for her future filled with joy and happiness. The festivities conclude with 'The Night of Spirituality,' during which the couple's room is prepared. A large table

is set in the center of the room, featuring various types of sweets, wine, the water of life, and chicken. Boys and girls are invited to observe this table and partake in its offerings, hoping that they too will find happiness in marriage and experience such a joyous night (Malka 2003, 33-45).

Marriage among Moroccan Jews is generally considered a contract based on religious legislation. It begins with the marital blessing and is followed by the recitation of a ritual formula. These two elements represent a single ritual celebration that officially consecrates the legitimate and legal union of the spouses. This corresponds to what the fiancé presents to his fiancée, often in the form of coins or something of value. Consequently, this process blesses the marriage with the qadosh, or The Seven Blessings of Wine. Marriage encompasses a series of procedures designed primarily to protect the financial interests of women. The couple and their families can choose from various marriage systems. The dowry, or the traditional component of the Castilian system. The marriage contract specifies the legal dowry amount, to which both the advance and the wife's share are added. In the event of the husband's death or a divorce, the total sum documented in the marriage contract typically reverts to the woman. This can be accomplished as per the marriage contract or through mutual agreement, where Castilian law may introduce general clauses aimed at better protecting women's interests (Zafrani 1987, 78-79).

Perhaps these measures, taken together, clearly explain the keenness of Jewish law and legislation to protect and preserve women's rights in a solid manner while simultaneously undermining all the prejudices that colonialist writers promoted against Jewish women in Morocco. According to their perspective Jewish women in Morocco were denied any rights. These and other measures have been in effect in the Jewish community in the Middle Atlas, especially in the city of Fez, since the sixteenth century AD (Zafrani 1987, 79). Therefore, if this is the reality of wedding celebrations among the Jews of Morocco and the Jews of the Atlas, as described by Jewish writers, how did foreign writings, especially British ones, view this social occasion?

The English traveler and military physician William Lempriere (d. 1834 AD) observed a specific aspect of the wedding rituals of the Atlas Jews in his book entitled «A Tour Through the Dominions of the Emperor of Morocco». He pointed out that wedding ceremonies within this community held great importance, evident in the commencement of celebrations several days prior to the main wedding ceremony. He then proceeded to describe the henna ceremony and the process of applying henna to the bride's hands and feet (Lempriere 1813, 186).

In turn, the English journalist Budgett Meakin (d. 1906 AD) placed significant importance on wedding celebrations in his book, titled «The Moors: A Comprehensive Description». Within it, he included a saying that reflects the significance of this occasion among the Jews of the Atlas and the Jews of Morocco in general. However, he attributed it to the Arabs, stating, «While the Muslim squanders his substance in religious festivals, and the Christian in la-wsuits, the israelit does so in naptial bouts» (Budgett Meakin 1902, 441). He also took the opportunity to record valuable information related to the wedding preparation process, stating in this context:

«What shall I say of the days of preparation, of the breaking of a jar of corn at the door of the bride's room to ensure her fruitfulness, of the slaughter of cattle and sheep and fowls; of the festivities at the bride's house, and the jolifications at those of the bridegroom; of the conclave of the previous Sebt er-Rai «Counsel Saturday» when all arrangements are made; of the despatch next day to the bridegroom's house of the dowry and bridal presents; of the special bathing on the Monday; of the customs and fun of the talamo or bridal bed, on which young ladies sit for luck; of Tuesday's torch-light procession of the bride to the house, of the bridegroom, chaperoned by her mother, who there spends the night with her; of her induction in state next day by two of the most important male guests; of her sitting for hours hke a waxen doll with closed eyes from beneath which perchance there steals an occasional tear; of the ceremony of the Sheba Berakhot—Seven Blessings—at an hour after noon that day, with nasal chant and chorus, with exchange of rings, the drinking of wine and the breaking of glass; or of the thousand and one minor observances which vary indefinitely here» (Budgett Meakin 1902, 441-442).

It should be noted that intermarriage between Jews and Muslims in the Atlas Mountains is exceedingly rare (Stutfield 1886, 142), and even if marriage between the two parties is proven, it occurs very rarely (Trotter 1881, 292). British Captain George Robert Beauclerc (d. 1871 AD) devoted a number of pages from his book «A Journey to Marocco in 1826» to describe the wedding ceremony of the Jews of the Atlas. He mentioned that this occasion provided an opportunity to gather with friends at the bride's home, where refreshments were served. At night, the bride announces her consent to the marriage, and the husband acknowledges that she has become his wife in front of the witnesses. Then, she is taken to a place where her hair is cut and replaced with another wig. Her nails are trimmed, and henna is applied to her. Her eyelids are decorated with kohl. After bathing, she is perfumed and taken to her new home by her husband (Beauclerc 1828, 281-282).

The American novelist and writer Edith Wharton (d. 1937 AD) also provided important but scarce indications in her book «In Morocco» about the rituals of wedding celebrations among the Jews of Fez. In it,

she mentioned that when the wedding procession passes, carrying gifts, a musical group dressed in bright caftans leads the way. Behind them are women with uncovered faces, their necks studded with jewels, and on their heads, they carry dishes that the guests have sent to the party. These dishes include couscous, sweets made of sugar and almonds (deer antlers), and various juices. All of these items are arranged in baskets woven with great precision and covered with several squares of shiny gauze with gold edges (Wharton 1920, 108).

Thus, we conclude that there is a significant intersection between what was stated in British writings and what was included in local Jewish writings regarding the monitoring of the wedding rituals of the Atlas Jews. This intersection is most evident in their shared emphasis on the great importance of this occasion from the first day of the preparation process until the day following the night of spirituality, including preparations, rituals, foods, drinks, and more.

There is also a remarkable similarity between the Jewish rituals and their Islamic counterparts, such as offering the dowry, the night of henna, the night of the bath, the night of spirituality, and the events that follow them. However, there are some partial differences that conflict with Islamic law, such as the consumption of alcohol, for example, during the night of Seven Brachot.

3- Circumcision: An opportunity for celebration and pride

The circumcision ceremony is considered one of the most important religious rituals among Jews in general. It is attributed to Abraham, peace be upon him, as it is the command he received from the Lord. The Torah designates it as a sign of the covenant between Jehovah and the people of Israel (Bouamama 2011, 109). This occasion, which is truly considered a significant religious and family celebration, is marked by joyful festivities shared by both the rich and the poor. It occurs on the eighth day after birth, and the celebration typically takes place in the parents' home within the «maternity» room adorned with colorful «Sefarim» curtains. The practice, borrowed from the pledge of allegiance, involves true circumcision, known as «Mahila» in Hebrew and circumcision in Arabic. During this event, the mother arranges for the ritual amputation of her son's foreskin as a protective measure against death (Zafrani 1987, 54).

In her book, «Ancient Customs», Elie Malka provides important information about this occasion and the magnitude of the celebrations held during it. During this event, women hang various amulets around the postpartum bed to protect the young newborn from the evil eye. As for the boy, he is dressed in a small silk suit, while the mother wears a dress embroidered with gold. She then takes her newborn in her arms. In the Atlas region, specifically in the city of Fez, the circumcision ceremony, called «Milla» takes place after the

morning prayer. It is attended by a large crowd, as this ceremony represents the entry of a new individual into the religious community. Through it, the covenant between God and the people is renewed, after performing some of the rituals associated with the circumcision process, the «Mohel», one of the clerics responsible for performing the procedure, arrives. While he may not have a strong cultural background, he has earned a good reputation in the city through his circumcision services. He proceeds to recite special prayers for the occasion before performing the circumcision on the newborn. After the procedure is completed, the audience participates in additional prayers (Malka 2003, 17-19).

When it comes to the memoirs of British travelers, we do not find abundant information on the subject of the circumcision ceremony and the accompanying rituals whether in the memoirs that make only brief references to the Jews of the Atlas Mountains or in those providing a general overview of the Jews of Morocco. There are, however, a few exceptions, such as the references made by the British journalist Budget Meakin in his aforementioned book and his study on «the Jews of Morocco». Nevertheless, his discussion of this ceremony closely aligns with previous accounts (Meakin 1892, 385-386.).

Whatever the case may be, the circumcision ceremony for the Jews of the Atlas remains one of the most prominent religious and significant social occasions, surrounded by a profound aura due to its great sanctity. During this event, the Jewish religious community is strengthened by the joining of a new individual, and all necessary precautions are taken to ensure that the newborn is not afflicted with the evil eye. In addition to its religious dimension, the occasion holds an important social aspect, characterized by the gathering of relatives and loved ones. Women take this as an opportunity to showcase their most luxurious clothes and jewelry.

4- Funeral rituals

Funeral rituals are numerous due to the diversity of religions, beliefs, and references. Each religion, whether divine or secular, has special rituals that distinguish it from others. In the Jewish religion, which is the one we will focus on in this regard, funeral rituals are characterized by unique features that do not differ much from those held among Muslims, as they constitute an important part of the Jewish religious conscience (E-Saadi 1994, 47).

After the patient enters the throes of death, the religious group responsible for burying the deceased arrives. Its members sit near the dying person, and when they are certain that death is imminent, they commence chanting supplications from the text of «Shamma Ismail» (Zafrani 1987, 105-106). Following the patient's passing, additional supplications are recited. Subsequently, one of the gravediggers is dispatched to the

cemetery to dig a grave suitable for the status and level of the deceased individual. Some families even select the locations of their members' graves prior to their passing (E-Saadi 1994, 48). Immediately after the washing process, the deceased person is shrouded in a white shroud. In parallel with this, the religious group chants religious songs praying for forgiveness and contentment for the deceased. When the deceased person is buried, his family enters a mourning period. The first stage lasts for seven days (Malka 2003, 77-79), followed by thirty obligatory days in the second stage. In the third stage, the duration may vary, lasting seven, nine, or eleven months depending on family customs, social affiliation, or the status of the deceased (Zafrani 1987, 111).

Regarding the process of washing the deceased, it is known as «The ritual of purification», expressed in the Arabic-Hebrew word for »purity«, and it is endowed with the same majesty and awe. Other invocations and supplications are recited in which the name of God, 'Adonai,' is not mentioned but is instead replaced by the word «Hashm». The washermen or washerwomen (Ruhsim) carry the deceased on boards and perform various types of washing and purification according to the recipe stipulated in the Torah and confirmed by custom. This ritual demands great caution and care. They may use hot water, cold water, soap, rose water, orange blossom water, and fennel and thyme branches. This is done so that they can meticulously wash all the outlets. Specific numbered utensils are employed, with seven being used for certain types of washing. Great care is taken to ensure these utensils are not transferred from one hand to another. After use, they are placed on the ground, and another person takes them. Nails are trimmed, and clippings are collected to prevent them from being stepped on or crossed. Afterward, they are disposed of, just as clippings from living creatures are discarded directly into the sewers. This is done to prevent them from being used in acts of magic and sorcery (Malka 2003, 79).

It appears that English traveler William Lempriere and British journalist Budget Meaken adopted the approach of advanced Jewish writings to emphasize the funeral rituals of the Atlas Jews. They jointly observed that a large crowd attended the funerals of these Jews. Immediately after death, a special prayer was recited, the deceased was stripped of his clothes, which were considered unclean, and then covered. After a few hours, the person responsible for the washing process arrived with all the necessary equipment. Following established rituals, the deceased was wrapped in a shroud, and hired mourners and relatives would commence mourning and crying for several days (Budgett Meakin 1902, 444-445) (Lempriere 1813, 186).

According to Meaken, funerals are characterized by solemn sights and sounds. The males chant a resonant hymn in a huge procession that slowly advances towards their own cemetery. In a coffin-like basin

on the property of the group, the dead are buried in shrouds under horizontal stones measuring eighteen inches thick. After burial, at specific times, the women begin shouting at the gravestones, especially during the Tammuz feast, when an entire night is spent there (Meakin 1892, 387).

5- Conclusion

We can conclude from the above that there is no significant difference between what was covered in local and Jewish writings and what was included in the memoirs of English writers regarding the rituals related to weddings and circumcisions among the Atlas Jews in Morocco. This includes the joy, splendor, and hospitality that accompany these events, as well as the rituals related to the burial of the Atlas Jews and the associated customs, such as washing and shrouding processes, the hymns and prayers that accompany each individual step, and the solemn procession, «which is announced by the sound of a trumpet or shofar, a deer's horn. As soon as the blowing is heard, the shops close, and the crowd of people walking behind the coffin increases until they reach the cemetery. The procession's march is regular, with a chanted reading of the Psalm of Qabbai, consisting of twenty-two stanzas, each composed of eight verses» (Zafrani 1987, 107).

It's worth noting that many of the aforementioned rituals are also practiced by Muslims, such as the process of washing and shrouding, the supplications accompanying the procession, and the method of burial. The difference lies only in the content of the supplications and prayers, as well as some other minor details. Despite the prejudices of British travelers against Morocco and its society in various places, driven by self-centeredness or cultural transcendence, and strategic planning linked to clear political goals, in the subject we studied, we find them adopting what can be called «moderate exoticism», because they did not exaggerate their prejudice against the Atlas Jewish community. Instead, they aimed to maintain objectivity, acknowledging the differences, and refrained from vilification and hybridization.

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