
Ethnicity and entrepreneurship in Morocco: a photo-ethnographic¹ study

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Abstract: The majority of the people in Morocco are Indigenous Berbers; they are Muslim but not Arab. Morocco is also home to Christians and Jews. Arabic is spoken along with French, Spanish, and Berber dialects. Pluralism appears to have encouraged occupational clustering, and economic sectors reflect ethnic communities. This article incorporates the use of photographs to give an account of entrepreneurship in Morocco. It discusses spheres of economic activity and demonstrates how a middleman minority influenced commerce.

Keywords: Morocco; entrepreneurship; bazaar; pluralism; ethnicity; occupational clustering.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Dana, L.P. and Dana, T.E. (2008) 'Ethnicity and entrepreneurship in Morocco: a photo-ethnographic¹ study', *Int. J. Business and Globalisation*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp.209–226.

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1 Introduction

The Kingdom of Morocco *Maghreb el Aqsa* (literally: land farthest west) covers the western extreme of North Africa, separated from Spain by the Strait of Gibraltar. A rich history has made Morocco fairly heterogeneous.

The Indigenous people here are Berbers. Shor and Shor (1955, p.188) wrote, "Some tribesmen in the High Atlas accept Islam but not Koranic law". Hunt explained,

"They have occupied the rugged mountains since before the Muslim Arabs swept in from the east in the 8th century. The Berbers adopted Islam as they had previously taken to Christianity, but it was not a total embrace. Their religion combines Islamic and older tribal beliefs." (Hunt, 1980, p.119)

Racially, the Berbers have mixed with other groups, and the distinguishing feature of the Berbers is language. Their language has three dialects: Tamazight, Tarifit, and Tashlhiyt.

As explained by Tayler (2005, p.79), "Though dominated by Arabs for centuries, Berbers make up a majority in Morocco". Authorities have claimed that Berbers are "disturbing national unity" (Crawford, 2002, p.62). Venema and Mguild wrote,

"Arabs also regularly use stereotypes. With reference to the Middle Atlas Berbers, one informant said: 'they live as savages in tents near caves and forests'. They are nomads who use boots and plastic for clothing. They don't speak or read Arabic ..." (Venema and Mguild, 2003, p.35)

Crawford (2002, p.53) asserted, "Morocco's Imazighen (Berbers) are often ignored in current academic literature". Our paper gives an overview of ethnic groups in Morocco and their respective spheres of economic activity.

2 Methodology

With the mandate to be inductive and contextually sensitive, methodology for this exploratory study involved ethnographic fieldwork in Morocco, using qualitative methods. An emic research design was deemed most appropriate, in order to understand the underlying structures of culture from within. It was helpful to observe and interview simultaneously. Photography was heavily relied upon. As discussed by Patton (1982, 1987), social integration was a prerequisite to obtaining meaningful responses.

3 Historical background

The oldest inhabitants of this region are the Berbers, and they were joined by Jews over 2,000 years ago. The region was invaded by Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs, but the Ottomans never occupied Morocco. Therefore Morocco today is quite different from its neighbours who were exposed to Ottoman rule.

Fogg wrote,

"In the latter part of the seventh century A.D., the first Arab invaders reached the western plains of Morocco. They were aristocratic family, high literary culture, and full of proselytising zeal, and were the first cause of the important addition of Islamic culture to the partly Christian but mainly animistic and naturistic people who then inhabited N. Morocco. Being few in number, however, the former modified the social structure and the race of the N. Morocco Berbers in only a negligible way." (Fogg, 1940, p.85)

Fogg elaborated:

"The Arabs who came as a result of the eleventh-century invasion of North Africa were in different case, however. They were unlettered nomadic

Bedawin, who arrived in very large numbers, impelled principally by the purely economic considerations of finding new pasturage and new camping-grounds. Being nomadic pastoralists, they were ill-adapted to dislodging the mountain Berbers, who, largely on account of their physical environment, led a sedentary type of existence which was utterly opposed to that of the Bedawin.” (Fogg, 1940, p.85)

There was, therefore, little interaction between these ethnic groups, each of which had its own settlements (see Figure 1) and respective economy.

Figure 1 Berber settlement



Judeo-Berber symbiosis was widespread. However, to escape legal discrimination on the basis of religion, numerous Berber tribes converted to Islam. Yet, many Jews and Judaized Berbers resisted conversion and retained their cultural values along with related behavioural predispositions. Autonomous Judaized Berber tribes existed in Morocco, until the 12th century.

A Muslim kingdom was established, consisting of invading Arabs as well as Indigenous Berbers and a substantial Jewish community which was particularly involved in the realm of commerce. Each ethnic group remained within its cultural boundaries, allowing themselves to maintain their respective traditions. Over time, different business activities became associated with particular cultural groups. Morocco reached its zenith between the 12th and 15th centuries, at which time its empire stretched across the Strait of Gibraltar into Europe, and also as far east as today's Tunisia.

European influence arrived in Morocco during the 16th century when the Portuguese built a settlement at Mogador. In 1764, Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah (literally: Son of the Servant of God) decided to build a city on the site of Mogador. He then commissioned Nicolas-Théodore Cornut, an architect from Avignon, to draw the municipal plans. The new town was called Essaouira, literally meaning 'the well designed'. Seeking that his settlement be blessed, the sultan engraved the words *Barakat Mohammed* (blessing of Mohammed – prophet of Islam) on the city walls. Seeking prosperity for his subjects, the sultan invited Jews to immigrate to his new city and to start new enterprises. Many came and initiated trade with England.

Essaouira became known as the dividing town, with Chiadma Arabs living in blazing heat to the north, and Hahas Berbers fighting blizzards in the Atlas Mountains to the

south. Essaouira itself prospered as the port of Timbuctoo (Mali), wherefrom camels brought gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, and salt, along with treasures from Black Africa. Until the 12th century, half of the population in Essaouira was comprised of Christians and Jews.

Although neighbouring Algeria and Tunisia were both invaded by the Ottomans, Morocco remained an independent kingdom for over a millennium. While Europe began to industrialise, Morocco's independence allowed for its bazaar economy to remain static. The situation changed in 1912, when France and Spain claimed protectorates in Morocco. The ancient kingdom was then divided, and the port of Tangiers (Tanja in Berber and Arabic, Tanger in French and Tánger in Spanish), was declared an international city. Each sector had its own administration and respective currency.

The strategy of France was to divide and rule. In 1928, a French official wrote,

"We must utilise to our advantage the old dictum 'divide and rule'. The presence of a Berber race is a useful instrument for counter-acting the Arab race." (Halstead, 1967, p.72)

Ben Kaddour elaborated,

"To strengthen the so-called 'Berber race', the French introduced on 16 May, 1930, the Berber Dahir that legalised the customary courts in Berber areas ... On the economic level, tribal notables were given land and were transformed into feudal landlords, while on the political level, these tribal chiefs were appointed as *caids*." (Ben Kaddour, 1973, p.260)

Some Berber families became prosperous. Among the wealthy, it was common to acquire domestic help, sometimes from Mali. Descendants of dark-skinned Mali servants still live in Morocco and work for Berber families (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Servant pouring water for Berber master



In 1953, Sultan Sidi Mohammed bin Youssef was exiled. He returned to Morocco in 1955. In 1956, Morocco regained its independence and Sultan Sidi Mohammed bin Youssef became King Mohammed V.² Ben Kaddour (1973, p.261) observed, “When Morocco became independent in 1956, 70% of the population, including 80–85% of the Berbers were living in rural areas”. Coram (1973, p.269) wrote about the Berbers, “favoured by the colonial regime, they were denied identity as a group ... after independence”. In fact, only a handful of *caids* survived the transfer of power (Hart, 1973).

In February 1961, Hassan II succeeded Mohammed V. In September 1969, a military regime overthrew the monarchy in Libya. On Saturday, 10 July, 1971, officers tried to topple Hassan II.

In 1976, the Western Sahara (up to that time a Spanish territory known as Spanish West Africa) was divided between Morocco and Mauritania. In 1979, Mauritania pulled out, allowing Morocco to annex the balance of this territory. Thus, Morocco today is the merger of several previously separate political entities.

A single currency (the dirham) and a uniform system of administration was implemented such as to erode the economic barriers between zones. Perhaps because Morocco was occupied for only a short period, Westernisation did not take deep roots here, and to this day, important demographic and cultural differences remain within Morocco.

Morocco’s ethnic diversity has contributed to a contrasting and exciting mixture of Arab, Berber, African, Islamic and European influences. In Tangiers, people still speak Spanish (see Figure 3), and in many instances, Ladino (Judæo-Spanish). In Casablanca (see Figure 4), French is common. In the Atlas Mountains, Berber dialects prevail. In September 2003, the government allowed for the first time, the teaching of the Berber language in over 10% of the schools in Morocco.

Figure 3 *Gran Teatro Cervantes, Tangiers*



Figure 4 *Hotel Trans-Atlantique*, Casablanca



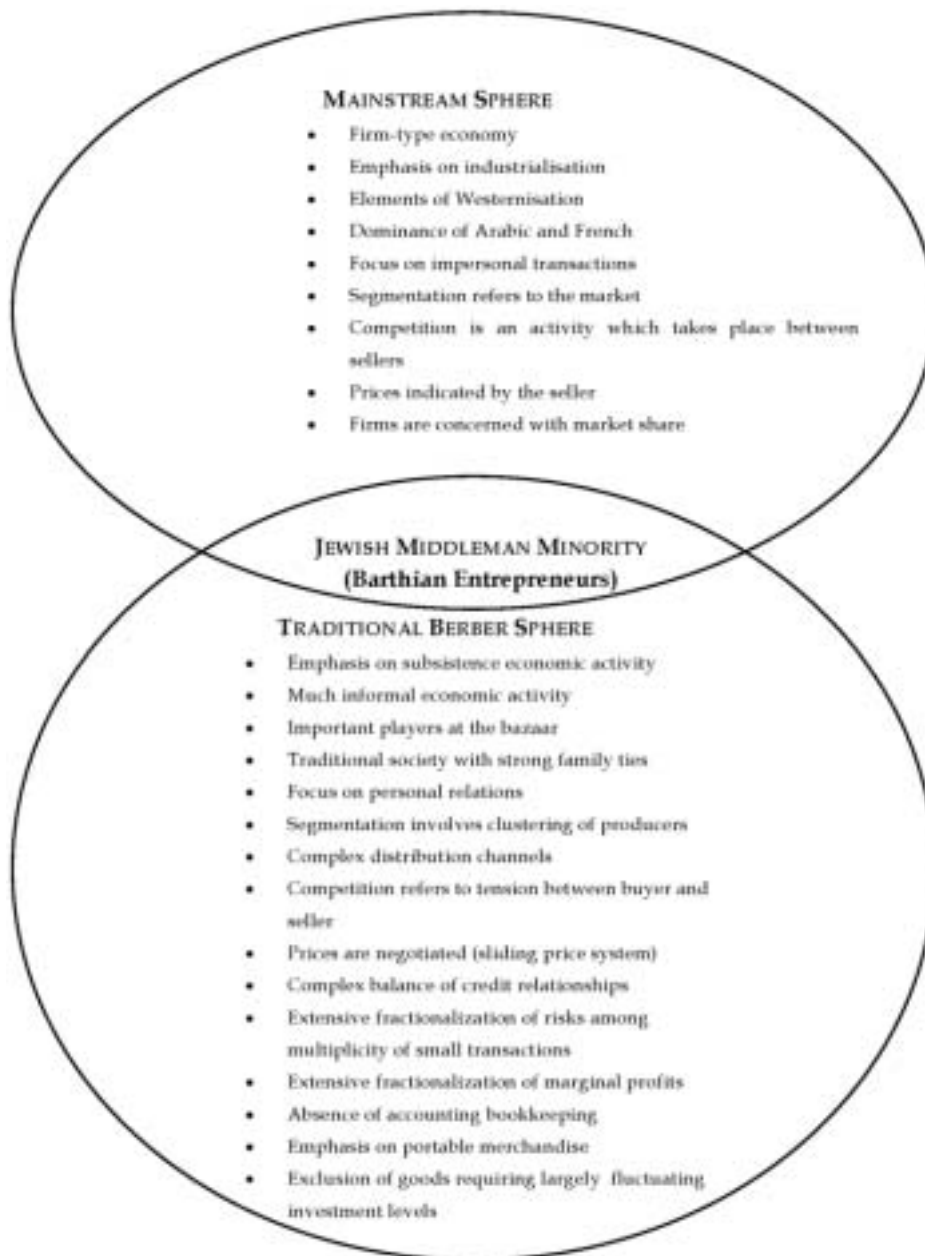
4 Pluralism and clustering

There are different models of pluralism. *Melting pot pluralism* involves a multicultural society, the members of which interact in a shared, secular mainstream arena, reserving the expression of cultural differences to private life; this is the case in the USA. At the other extreme is *structural pluralism* involving different communities, each with distinct lifestyles; separate institutions reduce the need to share a core universe.

Structural pluralism in Morocco allowed for each ethno-cultural community to retain its respective language and cultural values. Islamic tradition required that non-Muslims be treated as second-class citizens; nevertheless, a symbiotic relationship flourished between Jews and Muslims, and each was given special neighbourhoods in which to reside and to set up enterprises. This, in turn, formalised economic specialisation along ethnic lines. Whereas Islam frowns upon the concept of interest, for example, Jews often served as bankers financing new venture creation and other business activity. Some items

were sold only by Jews while others were sold only by Muslims. Silversmiths were invariably Muslim, while goldsmiths were Jewish. Jews were also very active in the spice trade, and they specialised in the socio-economic function of distribution. Merchandise was often purchased on credit, thereby requiring a relationship of trust between supplier and peddler. Many Jews were peddlers, or suppliers to other vendors, inland. They served as Barthian middlemen, as suggested in Figure 5.

Figure 5 Spheres of values in Morocco



According to Waterbury (1972), Casablanca was a fishing port with a population of 12,000 at the time of the establishment of the French protectorate, in 1912. Under French rule, European entrepreneurs opened factories, producing glass, soap, textiles, trucks and wines. Jewish merchants, for example, enjoyed a virtual monopoly of maritime trade until WWII. Until independence, Morocco was home to half a million Europeans and to over 250,000 Jews.

In the north of Morocco, sub-tropical Mediterranean climate is tempered by maritime breezes, and ample rainfall allows agriculture to thrive. Here, one finds numerous Arabic-speaking farming communities and orange groves, the produce of which is exported around the world.

It is said that the Berbers came to live in the Atlas Mountains as a result of the desertification of the Sahara. The abundance of water in these mountains allows small-scale farmers to cultivate and to care for small herds of goats and sheep, which provide milk, meat and cash. Although the economy is capitalist, culture gives importance to the extended family home, and it is common for individuals to lend a hand when useful. A typical Berber village has a collective granary.

In the Berber sphere of life, much emphasis is on subsistence, and society retains a traditional structure with strong family ties and importance given to the extended family. Family members may take turns caring for animals. The size of the flock indicates economic status, as livestock is the source of food, wool, hide and transport. Both sheep wool and camel wool is used, not only for clothing but also to produce rugs and containers for storage. Like sheep, goats are used for fibre, meat and milk. The fact that goats are browsers (they enjoy weeds and thistles) makes this animal highly compatible with sheep, which naturally avoid weeds. Crops include almonds, barley, beans, cannabis, citrus fruits, cork, corn, dates, flaxseed, grapes, mint, oats, olives, parsley, peas, sorghum, tobacco, vegetables and wheat. Some produce is used for subsistence; surplus is given away, traded, and sold at the bazaar. Tayler (2005, p.82) noted, "Though they take pride in being self-sufficient, mountain Berbers rely on markets for such hard-to-find staples as oranges, spices, sugar, and medicines".

Business transactions are a function of personal relations, rather than a reflection of advertising or competitive pricing. Prices are negotiated during a friendly discussion between buyer and seller. Here, competition does not refer to an activity between sellers, but rather to the tension between a buyer and a seller during the course of negotiations. Consumers are not segmented here; instead, segmentation refers to the geographic clustering of producers. On one road there may be several butchers; on another are numerous smiths. There is no product or brand differentiation here. Instead, personal relations influence a sale. Tayler (2005, p.90) emphasised the importance of connections, saying "getting a job in Morocco, for Berbers and Arabs alike, frequently depends not on talent but on connections".

"We are brothers; but when we do accounts, we are enemies".

Berber proverb quoted in Waterbury (1972, p.48)

Language perpetuates ethnic identity and occupational clustering in Morocco. In the eastern province of Azilal, farmers speak Tashlhiyt, and shepherds speak Tamazight. The son of a shepherd usually becomes a shepherd, and, because of linguistic preference, he often marries the daughter(s) of a shepherd family. A farmer's son usually becomes a farmer and marries into a farming family. Camels are often used to plough

fields. At the edge of the Sahara Desert (see Figure 6), camels are traded at periodic camel markets.

Figure 6 Camels at the edge of the Sahara desert



5 Spheres of economic activity

Barth (1963) viewed entrepreneurship as an activity involving the relationship of persons and institutions in different ethnic communities; Barth (1967) elaborated on how entrepreneurs are the social agents of change, active in the transformation of a community. Morocco is one such country wherein entrepreneurial behaviour may be said to follow Barth's pattern. French traders are primarily found in urban centres and they participate in the formal firm-type sector of the economy. Much Indigenous enterprise takes place in the subsistence and informal sectors. Also important is the bazaar economy. One often sees overflowing jars containing a pink mixture against magic or a green mixture against magic and a blue mixture against the evil eye.

Subsistence economic activity refers to that which is consumed internally rather than sold (Cole and Fayissa, 1991; Dana, 2005). There is no external exchange; no business transaction takes place. Wealth is created, but nothing is sold for profit; that which is created is consumed or saved for personal use. Internal subsistence activity includes subsistence agriculture, involving no market transaction external to the producer. While internal economic activity exists, as an activity of choice, even amid the most advanced and industrialised backdrop (Dana, 1995), for some people in Morocco, this is the only strategy for survival.

Informal economic activity involves undeclared activity that can take the form of an impromptu stall or itinerant vending. For discussions of entrepreneurship in the informal sector, see de Soto (1989), Morris and Pitt (1995), Peattie (1987), Portes et al. (1989), Rosser et al. (2000), Sanders (1987) and Tokman (1978). Waterbury noted,

“in 1960, there were 41.4 *commerçants* per 1,000 inhabitants in Casablanca. This does not include unlicensed tradesmen and *marchands ambulants* who must easily outnumber the licensed tradesmen.” (Waterbury, 1973, p.244)

In the informal sector, the law is often bent, but authorities generally tolerate the sector. A relevant discussion from Dana (1992) is presented concisely by Chamard and Christie (1996). Johnson et al. (1998) discuss discretion in the sector.

In contrast, the bazaar is home to more structured entrepreneurship.

“Before protectorate times, the site of a market showed little or nothing to indicate its character as a market; but when the Spaniards established their *interventor* posts and the French their *Affaires Indigènes* bureaux at tribal market sites, a natural result was that permanent shops began to be built all along the four edges of the market site itself.” (Hart, 1973, p.35)

To this day, prices in the bazaar are not indicated (see Figure 7) but rather they are negotiated; the sliding price system of the bazaar results in the primary competitive stress being between buyer and seller (Parsons and Smelzer, 1956). The lack of information results in an imperfect market and with few exceptions, such as basic food staples, retail prices are not indicated; rather, these are determined by negotiations. Rosen wrote,

“Lacking detailed knowledge of the quality of particular goods, their purchase price by the dealer, and the consequent worth of various items presented for the bargainer's consideration, it is often the case that for certain major goods a man chooses the seller to deal with rather than the goods as such.” (Rosen, 1973, p.160)

Figure 7 At the bazaar



The customer tests price levels informally, before bargaining begins. It may be the buyer who proposes a price, which is eventually raised. As discussed by Geertz, the

“relatively high percentage of wholesale transactions (*i.e.*, transactions in which goods are bought with the express intention to resell them) means that in most cases both buyer and seller are professional traders and the contest is one between experts.” (Geertz, 1963, p.33)

Unlike Western relationship marketing, which is customer-centred (Evans and Laskin, 1994; Zineldin, 1998), the focus in the bazaar is on the relationship itself. Once a mutually satisfactory transaction has taken place, the establishment of a long-term relationship (Webster, 1992) makes future purchases more pleasurable, and profitable. A buyer (see Figure 8) looks forward to chatting again with vendors. As Hart (1973, p.34) noted, “Market day is for social intercourse as well as trade”.

Figure 8 “The purchase is secondary to the event”



There are many bazaars in Morocco; producers are clustered, creating an illusion of competition. The grand bazaar of Fès is described by de Perigny (1917). Very noticeable in Fès, is the cluster of tanners (see Figure 9) soaking sheep hides in tannic acid.

Figure 9 Tanner in Fès



Marrakech (see Figure 10) likewise has an important grand bazaar. The city's central square, *Djemea el Fna*, is also known as the "assembly place of the nobodies" (Zwingle, 1996, p.106). On a random day in the big square, there may be 50 orange juice sellers side-by-side. Water vendors wearing similar brass aprons carry water in identical goatskin bags. From the square, the bazaar spreads into the alleys where turbaned merchants conduct business. Sitting at a café, drinking the best mint tea around, an onlooker can view the square as it transforms itself over the course of the day. At dawn, stall and shop owners begin to open their places of business. They receive merchandise delivered on horse-drawn carts. One wholesaler supplies oranges to numerous orange juice vendor stalls.

Figure 10 Marrakech



As the sun rises, jugglers, magicians, acrobats and storytellers start their acts. The heat of the day begins to burn, but the music of the snake charmers echoes loudly. Caution must be taken when a show begins, as the charmer has tactics to make tourists pay dearly for the show. Sellers of cigarettes and film, as well as thieves and hustlers, mingle their way through the thick crowds of locals and tourists alike. An artisan works red-hot iron, while servants carry dough to the public ovens known as *farran*. Not far, a Berber pharmacist sells gazelle skulls (for good luck) and *kohl* stone which is used as mascara. There are also products believed to combat evil eye and other evil spirits.

The souqs of Marrakech shimmer with intense colours and emanate smells of sweat and spices. There are scents of bay leaf, cinnamon, cumin, fresh mint, ginger, leather, musk, paprika, potter's clay, saffron, sandalwood, thyme, and vervain. Sounds include crying crows and braying donkeys along with traditional music. A call to prayer is heard behind the metalsmith's hammering. Louder than the bells of the water peddler are the screams of vendors whose high-pressure sales tactics are constantly used to lure tourists into buying silver and gold (usually plated) and amber (usually plastic) items.

6 A middleman minority

In a study of entrepreneurs in the USA, Loewen (1971) found that in some neighbourhoods inhabited by Afro-Americans, residents lacked the capital to open up shops. Yet, mainstream (white) merchants were reluctant to remain in business in such areas of towns. Loewen observed that Chinese shop-keepers emerged as the brokers between the economic sphere of white people, and that of local Afro-Americans. Thus, these Chinese entrepreneurs came to mediate boundary transfers. Bonacich (1973) coined the term 'middleman minority' to refer to such an ethno-cultural group who acts on culturally-influenced economic niches. Kim (1981) described Koreans in New York City as a middleman minority.

In Morocco, different communities retained their respective cultural traditions for many centuries. When the French introduced industrialisation to North Africa, they were reluctant to deal directly with the population at large. Favret (1973, p.323) described the Jews "as middlemen between European producers and Algerian markets". Waterbury wrote about the situation in Morocco,

"The French were all the more solicitous toward the Swasa and Jews in that the only other Indigenous group attempting to carve a niche for itself in the commercial and industrial establishment of Casablanca was the Fassi (people from Fes) bourgeoisie, and it was distinctly hostile toward the French."
(Waterbury, 1973, p.241)

Thus, Jews served as intermediaries, and Jewish entrepreneurs served as a bridge between the firm-type sector introduced by the French, and traditional activity in the bazaar economy, as depicted in Figure 5. Waterbury (1972, p.45) wrote, "Jews at Tangier ... controlled most of the wholesale businesses in foodstuffs". Waterbury (1973, p.242) also noted, "For years, four or five Jewish families had controlled tea imports and wholesaling in Morocco". Dunn (1973, p.95) observed, "As almost everywhere else in Morocco, most of them found their professional niche as merchants, jewellery makers or cobblers". Hart (1973) also mentioned them making jewellery. Why were they often concentrated in the realm of business? Adam explained,

“the Jews were tradesmen (and artisans ...) because they were denied the right to own land; where this was granted (in certain valleys of the High Atlas, for instance among the Ait Bougmez) Jews became farmers.” (Adam, 1973, p.329)

However, Jewish farmers were relatively few in Morocco, and being Jewish was almost synonymous with being self-employed (see Figure 11). Adam (1973, p.329) explained, “It is true that neighbouring tribes are inclined to call men from the trading tribes ‘Jews’”.

Figure 11 Catering to ethnic enclave



While the French used Jewish entrepreneurs as middlemen, Berbers also preferred to deal with Jewish middlemen. Rosen explained,

“when there were numerous Jewish merchants in Sefrou, Berbers clearly preferred dealing with them because the Jews were socially non-competitive, linked in a clearly symbiotic relationship with the Muslims, and interested mainly in straightforward economic relationship with the Berbers.”
(Rosen, 1973, p.161)

As summarised in Figure 5, the mediation of boundary transfers became an economic specialisation of the Jews. In this capacity, Jewish entrepreneurs were social agents of change, in the Barthian sense, as they introduced the features of the firm-type economy, along with technology and industrialisation. Emancipated Jews left the *mellah* communities and moved to the *nouvelles villes* (literally: new towns), modern areas built by the French.

European settlement in Morocco was clustered along the coastline, and in asablanca, for example, the architecture still reflects a strong European presence. European entrepreneurs introduced industrialisation and a Western-style firm-type economy to these areas. The Jews served as middlemen, and when Tangiers was an international zone, its streets were lined up with hundreds of duty-free shops.

During the French rule of Morocco, the French authorities preferred to deal with Jews than with Muslims, and consequently used them as a middleman minority. After independence, the Jews continued to serve as a middleman minority between the Western-style modern sphere and the traditional bazaar economy of the Indigenous people. This facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas. In recent years, however, demographics have been changing and thousands of Jewish entrepreneurs have gone to seek opportunities elsewhere.

7 Conclusion

Towards the future

In this pluralistic society (see Figure 12), ethnicity has greatly influenced occupational clustering, and economic specialisation has traditionally taken place along cultural lines. Urbanised Berbers are pushing for rights in mainstream society. Meanwhile, those in the Atlas mountains ‘eke out a living’ (Tayler, 2005, p.79) as self-employed farmers, carrying on a 5,000 year old culture.

“Family businesses are common; they provide a cushion against poverty for those who learn a trade as children, then live in the family home as adults.”
(Zwingle, 1996, p.108)

Given the increased need for cash, “Women plow the fields and raise the children while their men increasingly toil in the cities” (Tayler, 2005, p.89). In addition, Moroccans, working abroad, send sizable amounts of their income home, as gifts and in the form of investments.

Geertz wrote,

“the distinction – partly cultural, partly linguistic, partly social, partly a kind of ethnopolitical myth, a traditional, almost instinctive way of perceiving group differences – between ‘Arab’ and ‘Berber’ remains an important, elusive factor in Moroccan national life.” (Geertz, 1973, p.302)

Over three decades later, this is still true.

“The king talked of a multiple Moroccan identity, which was taken to mean Arab, Berber, French and Jewish”.

– “Morocco’s Brave New King,”
The Economist, October 30, 1999, pp.47–48.

Figure 12 Multicultural society



Acknowledgement

The authors thank the three reviewers who supplied substantial suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

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Notes

¹This paper places heavy emphasis on photography.

²A monarch in Morocco is simultaneously the chérif, the religious émir of the Muslims, and the khalif. It is an Islamic tradition that a leader exercise religious influence as well as executive, legislative and judicial powers.