



Aomar Boum. *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8851-9.

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From “Indigenous” to “Other”: Moroccan Jews and Postcolonial Morocco

The diverse North African populations which have settled in France since colonialism have been the focus of excellent recent research. *Memories of Absence* is in many ways a necessary complement to this research: it explores the consequences of mass migration on sending countries. The ways the departed are remembered and the changes wrought in local memoryscapes as decades pass are the focus of this masterful book. Moroccan Jews, with ties to North Africa for millennia, left Morocco *en masse* after independence, often for Israel. Aomar Boum analyzes how they are remembered by Moroccan Muslims a half-century after their departure. Based on fieldwork conducted in southern Morocco buttressed by extensive archival research that includes previously unknown documents, this work makes important contributions to several fields, including Moroccan history, legal anthropology, and Jewish studies. Scholars in the interdisciplinary collective memory field will find this an essential text, and those interrogating the development of racism and anti-Semitism will find Boum’s conclusions sobering.

Any work trying to compile individuals’ stories about a past time they collectively shared must sort out how to present the findings and incorporate corroborating and contrasting archival evidence into a coherent, readable whole. This is where this book will be of special interest to scholars of collective memory. Considering which factors are central in the formation of Muslim memories about absent Jews, Boum based his findings on interviews with eighty people of Arab and Berber ethnicities, rang-

ing in age from the early twenties to the late nineties. They are equally divided into *shurfa* and *haratine* lineages (those of *shurfa* status claim ties to the Prophet Mohamed’s family lineage, and the *Haratine*, of lower social status, are black descendants of slaves or indigenous black residents). Boum, who grew up in southeastern Morocco where he conducted his research, brings to this study expertise difficult to duplicate. We are introduced to his interviewees through lovely vignettes throughout the text. Boum groups them into four cohorts according to the political period in which they came of age: “great grandparents,” who experienced the French Protectorate (1912-56); “grandparents,” who witnessed the influences of the Vichy era on the region (1940-43) and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948; “parents,” who came of age during Moroccan independence in 1956, wars between Israel and Arab states in 1967 and 1973, and the emigration of Jews to Israel in the early 1960s; and members of the “younger generation,” who have primarily encountered Jews indirectly, through the media. Despite the dramatic changes across the generations, the most significant factor shaping generational outlook was the degree of interaction between Muslims and Jews.

After a poignant prologue and clear, succinct introduction, the substantive chapters are organized topically. “Writing the Periphery” engages with colonial-era narratives of the “Moroccan Jewish hinterlands” (p. 11). Through a critical look at the accounts of European travelers, Muslim and Christian Zionists, and anti-Semitic colonial officials, Boum considers the problem of bias

and the role of postcolonial researchers like himself. We learn of early Jewish life in this region—their occupations, trading routes, and residency among Muslim populations under the protection of Muslim tribal lords, a situation that lasted into the French Protectorate. Remarkably, given how much time has transpired since this period, this chapter also draws on oral testimony, as some of Boum’s “great-grandfathers” recount oral narratives from the earliest years of French colonial forays.

Private archives left behind by departing Jewish neighbors and business partners comprise much of the original material presented in chapter 2, “Outside the *Mellah*,” which provides a fascinating look at how Jews and Muslims came together in the market. Although they needed the protection of Muslims, Jews could plead cases before Muslim judges and request legal protection from tribal councils or European consulates. Legal anthropologists will be especially interested in eleven case studies developed from his interlocutors’ private archives that demonstrate the intricate overlapping jurisdictions, a situation that moved beyond legal pluralism to that of “legal syncretism” (p. 31).

Chapter 3, “Inside the *Mellah*,” explores life in the Jewish quarters of Atlas mountain villages. There were two kinds of settlements in the *bled* (hinterlands): some Jewish peddlers and merchants rented homes and warehouses from local Muslims, but in many villages they lived in Jewish quarters (the *Mellah*) where they found relative independence under rabbinical authority. Boum visits the crumbling remnants of defunct synagogues while interviewing elderly Moroccans about their former friends and neighbors. Change came to this area of Morocco relatively late, and he highlights the realm of education and the transformation of the town of Akka in particular. Prior to the arrival of the French, education was handled by religious institutions. French educational facilities and the Alliance Israélite Universelle arrived in the region by the 1920s and late 1940s, respectively, and faced some local resistance. In the end, these developments were modest, and they were trumped by the much more significant suite of changes brought about by Moroccan independence in 1956, the subject of the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 4, “Little Jerusalems’ without Jews: Muslim Memories of Jewish Anxieties and Emigration,” considers Jews’ departure from Morocco in the wake of French colonialism. Why Jews left was a topic of prominent concern for the older generations Boum interviewed. One of his interlocutors was a soldier in the Southern Army

of Liberation and had worked with Jews from the south. He asserted that Jews saw Morocco as their country, and blamed their departure on the newly independent state, asserting, “We did a poor job in enlisting them in post-independence nation building. The Zionists succeeded where we failed” (p. 90). Boum considers this position, offering a nuanced view that also takes into account the pull of centuries-long religious ties to Palestine, the role of the Vichy regime, and debates about the position of Jews in Moroccan society among various political parties pre- and post-independence.

My favorite chapter considers the representation of Jews in the contemporary, post-independence period, which has been characterized by an increasing silencing—the “collective intentional act of ignoring Moroccan Jews in their history” that held sway until the late 1990s (p. 110). The ways this silencing has shaped contemporary Moroccan society is explored through a study of representations of Jews at two museums, one the private project of a Moroccan Muslim, and the second created in the late 1980s by Casablanca’s Jewish community. Boum first introduces us to Ibrahim Nouhi, a “grandfather” with no museum training who developed his museum to fill the gaps in understanding among young people: “I knew that our students and teenagers needed to be introduced to Moroccan history and its complexity. People are getting only one story these days. They need to know that the world is more complex than what the media feeds them,” he told Boum (p. 121). His museum highlights the “multiethnic character of the oases in southern Morocco and the importance of the Jews in these Saharan societies,” and it could be viewed as presenting a “counternarrative,” an attempt to confront the amnesia that had settled in during the 1970s and 1980s.

In contrast, the Jewish Museum of Casablanca “represents Moroccan Jews in complete political and cultural isolation” (p. 125). Created by Moroccan Jews who have remained, it is run by a nonprofit that receives state funding and yet nationally is perceived as Jewish but not Moroccan. It is silenced in many ways: there is cryptic signage, making it difficult to locate, and it is not even on the national tourism office’s list of national museums. This situation of state support and yet disavowal of that support reflects “tensions in the national debate about the status of Jews in Morocco” (p. 129), a situation that Boum attributes in part to the shadow of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which makes it “difficult to celebrate the cultural accomplishments of Moroccan Jewry without also commenting on Israeli policies towards Palestinians” (pp. 126-127). Boum concludes that while the state

may present itself to the international community as celebrating its Jewish past, it allows private curators, such as Nouhi and a Jewish association, to take the lead in representations of Moroccan Jewish heritage.

Chapter 6 moves into the views of Jews held by Moroccan youth, who have lived in a region mostly devoid of Jews. Boum's description of youth engagement with the Internet, the realm of the Moroccan university, and the Internet café presents a case study for those interested in digital ethnography and in North African youth culture. Scholars interested in the contexts in which xenophobia can flourish will also find data of value in this chapter. Boum shows how in the absence of encounters with real Jews, Moroccan youth import external ideas and talk about Jews in terms of jokes, gossip, and rumor.

A succinct conclusion ties together the findings from the substantive chapters, exploring how four generations of Muslims differ in their perceptions and constructions of Jews. The book ends with a meditation on elite-

sponsored international music festivals that promote interfaith dialogue by commemorating medieval Islamic Spain; rather than celebrating this movement as a helpful corrective, Boum concludes on a cautionary note, arguing that the sense of community created by such events is fleeting in the absence of everyday interaction between Jews and Muslims in Morocco.

In sum, this is a beautifully written book that contributes to multiple scholarly fields. It presents a society whose collective memory is fractured by generational divides. The absence of Jews in contemporary Morocco has led to a disconnect between the generations, the oldest of whom remember friends and neighbors and create museums in their memory, the youngest of whom have reduced Jews to caricatures stripped of any long-standing tie to Morocco. For these young Moroccans, the idea that Jews could be indigenous Moroccans is now an alien concept. Boum underscores the role of everyday interaction in preventing the propagation of long-standing animosity.

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