Journal of Ecohumanism
2024
Volume: 3, No: 8, pp. 10013 – 10018
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i8.5611

Customs, Traditions and Religious Occasions of the Moroccan Jews

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Abstract

Customs and beliefs constituted an integral part of the religious doctrine of the Jewish community in Morocco, blending with it to the point of inseparability. This reality has been vividly depicted in historical writings. These traditions were influenced by religious beliefs but were also deeply shaped by the environment in which members of the Jewish community lived in Morocco. This reciprocal interaction left its mark on the social reality. The Jewish community formed a fundamental element of the societal fabric, interacting with Moroccan inhabitants in markets, seasonal events, and through trade that transcended vast geographic regions, under the framework of the "Dhimmi" status. They engaged in various forms of commerce, shared worship practices within a unified context, celebrated their joys with the same chants, endured famine and hardship with equal resilience and shared hope, and prayed for rain during droughts in the same language, gestures, and supplications.

Keywords: *Customs, traditions, Jews, Moroccans, community, social structure.*

Introduction

Among the marriage customs of Moroccan Jews is the role of a woman called "Mazouara," a previously married woman tasked with applying henna to the bride's feet and hands. This act is believed to protect the bride from the evil eye. In the Amizmiz region near Marrakech, the practice extends further: henna is scattered across the corners of the room to ward off envy and jealousy. It is also believed to protect the bride from demons and malevolent spirits (Bouazza El Farhan, 2016, p. 86).

Traditions and Customs of Moroccan Jews

After the henna ceremony, the henna bowl and incense burner, along with other decorative items used during the ritual, are placed on a palm-leaf platter. This platter is carried by seven men or women, one after another, while they sing and dance. The night of henna is called Henna Mazouara, and the custom requires the bride's family to gather henna from seven women. This mixture is diluted with water and applied to the bride's body a day or two before her wedding night. The belief behind this practice is that it protects the bride from harm, especially from adversaries who perceive her marriage as a triumph.

The henna ritual is an essential component of Moroccan wedding celebrations, imbued with significant cultural and symbolic value. Its importance transcends its decorative aspect, which adorns women's hands and feet (Bouazza El Farhan, 2016, p. 86).

Historically, Moroccan Jews settled in secure regions governed by powerful leaders with substantial influence, often linked to commerce. Under such leadership, Jews sought financial stability and economic prosperity. Despite maintaining their religious identity under local authorities' protection, which ensured safety during market travels, Jewish families also spoke their native Hebrew alongside Arabic. Their relationships with the local population were amicable, characterized by mutual visits for leisure, social bonding, celebrations, and condolences.

This interaction challenges the commonly held notion of Jewish isolation, revealing a form of cultural exchange among Morocco's diverse communities—Arabs, Berbers, and Jews alike (Abdelhadi Al-Madine, 2024, p. 61).

Local documents and records highlight a complex and intertwined legal framework rooted in customary practices. These customs provided Moroccan Jews, particularly those in remote and oasis regions, with a

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conducive social, political, and economic environment. They could negotiate social relations, address economic needs, and resolve disputes with Muslims in courts.

Despite the religious and social constraints limiting their movement within the predominantly Islamic societal framework of desert-edge regions, Jews managed to navigate these restrictions. They did so by actively engaging with customary and local legal systems while adhering to Hebrew laws in familial and communal matters (Abdelhadi Al-Madine, 2024, p. 62).

Morocco witnessed its largest wave of Jewish migration during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, primarily due to the expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492 and Portuguese Jews in 1497. This influx was supplemented by other Jewish refugees who found their way to Morocco. Upon arrival, the newcomers, including Sephardic Jews, settled in Morocco's coastal cities and major inland towns.

Unlike the indigenous Jewish population, which had been residing in North Africa for centuries, these new arrivals established settlements known as Megorashim, where they maintained their collective identity and preserved their Spanish language. Their European background provided them with skills and tools to act as commercial and political intermediaries for foreign institutions. Over time, the Sephardim adapted to local conditions but retained high-level craftsmanship, continuing to produce jewelry and garments heavily influenced by Spanish aesthetics, as they had done in Spain (Nitza Behrouzi, 1996, p. 64).

One notable example of Sephardic cultural heritage is the Keswa Kabira (the Grand Costume), a magnificent piece of Jewish urban attire. This elaborate garment, along with accompanying jewelry, served as wedding attire and later as formal celebratory clothing. The craft of jewelry-making and embroidery played a central role in adorning headpieces. Artisans employed various design sources and ornamental patterns, using diverse precious materials. Professions like goldsmithing, thread weaving, and coin minting were among the traditional crafts practiced by Moroccan Jews, often passed down from father to son (Nitza Behrouzi, Op. Cit., 1996, p. 65).

Jewish men, particularly those from Marrakech, were distinguished by their black attire, which included long coats, narrow trousers reaching the ankles, black slippers, and a black headdress. The poor among them wore simpler garments, such as long shirts, loose robes, and belts of varying width, topped with a black cloak. Older Jewish men maintained distinctive hairstyles with long sideburns and unshaven, scattered beards (Atta Ali Muhammad Shihata Rayya, 1999, p. 99).

This black attire reflected adherence to an ancient dress code and grooming style. However, from the late 19th century onward, younger generations began adopting European fashion. Traditional garments were replaced by European-style suits, modern shoes, and hats. By the 20th century, educated Jewish youths, particularly those attending Alliance Israélite Universelle schools established in Morocco since 1862, fully embraced Western clothing, making it difficult to distinguish between Moroccan Jews and French citizens based on appearance alone (Mohammed Boussalem, 2024, p. 209).

Jewish women wore wide trousers and loose, long-sleeved shirts called Ghennabayz or Kashut, over which they donned open-sided robes and sashes known as Koushak. Wealthier women replaced the loose shirts with Kaftan or Half-Kaftan and paired these with embroidered slippers called Balgha Maqoura. For celebrations, affluent women dressed in the Keswa Kabira, an opulent costume introduced from Andalusia during the 18th century, particularly among elite Sephardic Jewish migrants in northern Moroccan cities like Tangier, Fez, Tetouan, and Meknes.

Adhering to Talmudic teachings, traditional Jewish women refrained from exposing their hair or physical adornments. They used scarves, veils, wigs, and artificial braids to conceal their hair, often wrapping it in a piece of black silk known as Mekhremma, blending it seamlessly with additional layers for modesty (Mohammed Boussalem, 2024, p. 211).

This fusion of local and Sephardic traditions illustrates the cultural resilience and adaptability of Moroccan Jews while highlighting the influence of their Andalusian heritage on Moroccan society.

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Demographic and Historical Composition of Moroccan Jews

Jews were first and foremost Ahl al-Dhimma, as they enjoyed a free system regarding their rituals, religious customs, and management of their social affairs. However, their relations with Muslims were theoretically and sometimes practically subjected to the general principles of Moroccan Muslims, including the obligation to respect the Quran, the personality of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and Islam in general. Any Jew who assisted the enemies of Muslims would face severe punishment, possibly execution. Furthermore, they were required to wear distinctive attire, their houses were not allowed to exceed the height of Muslim buildings, and they were prohibited from drinking alcohol publicly, reading their religious books, or performing their prayers openly (Moulay Abdulhamid Al-Alawi Al-Ismaili, 1985, p. 262).

The Jews were compelled to comply with these restrictions and customs imposed on them, especially during the rule of those who sought to distinguish them from others to ensure their protection and care, not to demean or oppress them, nor to prevent interaction or dealings with them. Evidence of this includes the measures taken by the Almohad Caliph Ya'qub Al-Mansur, who required them to wear distinctive attire. He imposed dark-colored garments with excessively wide sleeves extending to their feet, and instead of turbans, he made them wear peculiar head coverings resembling saddles that extended below their ears. However, his son Al-Nasir responded to their pleas and changed their attire to yellow garments in 1198 (Abdulhamid Al-Alawi Al-Ismaili, 1985, pp. 262–263).

The Jewish population, due to necessity, often occupied the lower ranks of the Moroccan social hierarchy and engaged in various trades considered inferior by Muslims. This included embroidery, which involved the use of threads influenced by Islamic aesthetics. Consequently, the garments sold by Jews in the markets adopted a tangible form and color of Islamic Moroccan attire. Additionally, Moroccan Jews worked as jewelers, particularly among migrant Jews who frequently moved between Andalusia (carrying Spanish Christian culture) and the Maghreb (carrying Arab-Islamic culture). The jewelry produced by Jews was primarily influenced by Moroccan decorative arts and architecture (Nitza Behrouzi, Op. Cit., 1996, p. 65).

In general, silk embroidery was a craft practiced by Muslim women, while gold embroidery was a trade for Jewish men and women alike. The embroidery market flourished during festivals and weddings. The design and shape of Jewish jewelry and ceremonial tools were inspired by the Islamic environment in the Maghreb and the Moorish Spanish art of the 8th to 13th centuries, which permeated Moroccan architecture, popular culture, and visual arts. The Jewish artisan, due to religious prohibitions, sought to adorn their jewelry with symbols rich in hidden meanings. The most common decorations included floral patterns, bird depictions, lotus flowers, pomegranates, and menorahs, representing Jewish rituals mentioned in the Torah, symbolizing life, death, and resurrection (Nitza Behrouzi, Op. Cit., 1996, p. 66).

Moroccan Jews also practiced tanning and dyeing, usually near rivers and away from residential areas or outside city walls, due to the foul odors emanating from these trades and the necessity of water use. They carried out these activities along riverbanks, but those located far from rivers caused specific problems by discharging wastewater into adjacent streets, polluting the pathways and pedestrians. This provoked resentment and led to indiscriminate anger directed at both innocent and guilty Jews alike (Atta Ali Muhammad Shata Riyah, 1999, p. 137).

These Jewish tanners and dyers were widespread in various regions of Morocco, such as Ait Daoud, where Jews practiced multiple trades, including dyeing. Similarly, in Tafetna, goat hides were tanned, and in the Heskoura region, where many goats were raised, their hides were tanned in the town of Takouddast by Jews. They also worked on hides from nearby mountains and transported them to Fez to produce half-boots and embroidered saddle covers, as well as various types of beautiful footwear (Atta Ali Muhammad Shata Riyah, 1999, p. 138).

Despite the interaction of their interests and the daily relationships between Jews and Moroccans in daily life, Jewish communities in Morocco remained distinct in their religion, customs, residences, cooking recipes, celebration methods, and clothing styles. According to a 1960 census, the total number of Jews in Morocco was 160,000, with most residing in urban areas. Rural Jews made up only 5%, while 95% were

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from educated classes. Their standard of living was relatively high compared to Muslim Moroccans. In terms of clothing, Jews wore black and dark colors, while Muslims wore white and other bright colors (Mohammed Bousalam, 2024, pp. 205–206).

Moroccan Jews were divided into two sects: the Rabbanites and the Karaites. Each claimed its doctrine was the most authentic and closest to the origins of Judaism (Qassem Abdu Qassem, 1987, p. 33). The Rabbanites, the most prominent and numerous Jewish sects, derived their name from the term Rabban, meaning rabbi or scholar. Their key text is the Talmud (Israel Wolfensohn, 1936, p. 46; Hassan Zaza, 1987, pp. 82–92).

Moroccan Jews lived under the influence of rules derived from the Torah and Halakha (Abdul Wahab Muhammad Al-Masiri, 2024, p. 409), with the Talmud encompassing all aspects of life (Abdel Moneim Al-Hafni, 1980, p. 107). This led some historians to describe the Talmud as an ethical law, connecting Moroccan Jews to broader Jewish thought (Chaim Zafrani, 2024, p. 7).

The Karaites, on the other hand, derived their name from the Hebrew root "Kara," meaning "to read" or "to proclaim." They were adherents who recognized only the Torah, as their doctrine rejected the Talmud as a source of law. They upheld the written scripture—the Old Testament—as the sole and ultimate source of religious law (Hassan Zaza, 1987, p. 247).

Jewish pilgrimage holidays included three major occasions, during which Moroccan Jews traveled to Jerusalem to visit the Temple and perform rituals, offering sacrifices and gifts as prescribed in the Torah. The first holiday was Passover (Pesach), the second was the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), and the third was the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) (Chaim Zafrani, 2024, p. 237; Abdul Wahab Muhammad Al-Masiri, 2024, p. 276).

The Passover holiday held particular significance for Moroccan Jews, uniquely differentiating them from Jews worldwide. On the first night, known as Lailat al-Seder in Hebrew (the Night of Order and Sequence), they commemorated the Exodus from Egypt (Atta Ali Muhammad Shata Riyah, 1999, p. 106). This was marked by reading the Haggadah, narrating the Torah's account of liberation and the Exodus. Major religious celebrations were held in synagogues, but the Seder was celebrated within the family. The father played the role of the preacher, instilling teachings related to the "miracle of the Exodus" in his children's minds (Hassan Zaza, 1987, p. 247).

This familial aspect may have been the origin of various customs, superstitions, and traditions associated with the Seder celebration. Due to the ignorance of women and children regarding Hebrew—the language of worship—the Haggadah was translated into local dialects in regions with Jewish communities. In Morocco, there were several oral translations in Arabic and Old Castilian, brought by Spanish immigrants (Chaim Zafrani, 2024, p. 237).

If Passover is the commemoration of the historical salvation from the Egyptian yoke on the first day, then the last two days of Passover are called Mimouna in Arabic and Emunah in Hebrew (faith and belief), which means the salvation in the future from the end of the exile of the Jewish people, as promised by the Lord with the return to their land. Jews have used this holiday as an excuse to spread Zionist aspirations in their communities. In any case, Passover is the chosen time for making the pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem for Moroccan Jews (Chaim Zafrani, 2024, pp. 240–241).

This celebration includes the ritual that comes after the lunch prayer, called in Hebrew Birkath Ha'ilanoth, meaning blessing the trees, and heading to the gardens outside the city. Often, this ritual is performed under a vine whose fruits have not yet ripened. This represents a return to nature and new creation, linking the emergence of spring from winter with the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. It means the birth of the Jewish people through the exodus from Egypt, and the birth of nature and the universe are intertwined in Jewish rituals (Abdel Wahab Mohamed Al-Masiri, 2024, p. 276).

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In this celebration, called Mimouna by the Moroccans, houses are decorated, and gifts are exchanged. Many Muslims would also accept gifts from them. Therefore, Mimouna is the local Moroccan Jewish holiday that the Jewish community in Morocco has preserved (Chaim Zafrani, 2024, p. 242).

As for the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of the Harvest (Shavuot), the occasion of this holiday is the descent of the Torah and the Ten Commandments to Moses (peace be upon him) on Mount Sinai. This holiday lasts for two days and is called the Feast of Weeks, as it commemorates the weeks in which the children of Israel were given their duties. It is also called by Moroccan Jews the Feast of Pentecost (Abdel Wahab Mohamed Al-Masiri, 2024, p. 275).

The origin of this word in its linguistic derivation means "gathering" or "celebration." This holiday is not observed on Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday among the Rabbanites, and the Karaites do not adhere to specific days. Both Rabbanites and Karaites celebrate this holiday together in the synagogue. The celebration takes place on the sixth of Iyar and the first of June (Hassan Zaza, 1987, p. 189).

This holiday is universal among Jews, and on this holiday, Rabbanites and Karaites gather to celebrate it. The night vigils last until dawn, and selected texts from the Old Testament are read. Hymns are chanted in the synagogue or at home. After this celebration, a popular festivity is held where children share in feasts with fruits and sweets. In the synagogue, poems are read, and the afternoon Gift Prayer is held, where each Jew reads a passage from the aforementioned texts. If a significant mistake occurs during the reading, the congregation corrects it by shouting, "Repeat! Repeat! You know nothing," and sprinkles water on them. When the poem concludes, the person is thoroughly soaked in water (Chaim Zafrani, 2024, pp. 248–251).

Moroccan Jews celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths, called in Hebrew Sukkot. The origin of this holiday is agricultural, celebrating the storage of harvests, and Jewish law established it as a reminder of the Jews' dwelling in tents or booths in the Sinai desert after their exodus from Egypt (Zaki Shenouda, n.d., p. 275).

This holiday begins on October 15 and lasts for seven days (Qassem Abdu Qassem, 1987, p. 61).

Results

Based on what has been presented, it is clear that Jews, like other Abrahamic religions, have their own customs and traditions. However, it is noticeable that they have not been significantly influenced by Islamic traditions, especially Moroccan ones. This indicates their desire to remain separate and avoid mixing with other Moroccan communities. Their fear of persecution and mistreatment by Muslims, as well as their concern about losing their identity, likely drove them to hold onto their own customs and traditions without being affected by other practices.

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