



Aomar Boum. *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. xvii + 220 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8699-7.

Reviewed by Harvey Goldberg (Dept. Sociology and Anthropology)

Published on H-Judaic (June, 2014)

Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Jews in the Saharan Fringe: Ethnohistory and Moroccan Memories

A study of a Moroccan community in the Middle Atlas cites an origin myth in which the founder of the village married four women: a *sherifa* (descendant of the Prophet), a Berber, a *hartaniya* (a lower-status landless Muslim woman, often black; the general category is *haratine*), and a Jew.[1] This is one example of many scattered bits of knowledge hinting at how deeply Jews were interwoven into the structure of rural North African society. Only about a handful of scholars—historians and anthropologists—have dealt with the topic in depth. Aomar Boum’s volume breathes new life into the subject.

I have heard different reports over the past decades on how Moroccans refer to the Jews who once lived there (the Jewish population at mid-twentieth century was about 250,000). One extreme account is that they are spoken of as if they were an ancient population, such as the Romans. *Memories of Absence* clearly shows that this is misleading and that the story is much more complex. In fact, the title, forced to be brief, is itself a bit constricting. Boum’s study of the mechanisms and contents of memory is built on a rich historical ethnography. This combination makes the book worthy of special attention.

The bringing together of oral history, reexamination of known sources, and translation of local legal documents entailing Muslims and Jews, in itself, constitutes a significant addition to the study of Saharan Jewry, focused on the area of Akka. To this, Boum adds long interviews with four generations of Moroccan Muslims, be-

ginning with great-grandparents, who had direct contact with Jews (as did grandparents), through today’s young adults whose perceptions of Jews are shaped extensively by the media, Internet, and current ideologies. He deals with a consciously varied sample: the four generations reflect different political periods and the interviewees include Arabs and Berbers, and both *shurfa* (plural of *sherif*) and *haratine*. We are fortunate that this is not a study in “memory” alone, but an exploration of memory predicated upon a deep probing of the past.

For those new to the Maghrib, one might ask: why so much effort to uncover the past of a “remote” region? Boum presages an answer in his title to chapter 1, “Writing the Periphery: Colonial Narratives of Moroccan Jewish Hinterlands,” and the subtitle immediately thereafter: “Global Links and Jewish Disguises.” The latter term directly recalls the work of Charles De Foucauld whose reconnoiter of southern parts of Morocco in the 1880s was an important opening of an area uncharted by Europeans. De Foucauld was dressed as a Jew and traveled about pretending to be a rabbinic *shaliah* (emissary) collecting funds, while his guide was Akka-born Mordecai Aby-Serour, himself a kind of global character who studied at a yeshiva in Jerusalem and later—with members of his family—set up a short-lived Jewish commercial “colony” in Timbuktu. This is well known to students of Morocco, but what was new to me was Boum’s discussion of the mention of Akka in Pierre Van Passen’s *The*

Forgotten Ally. Van Passen, a defender of Jews and supporter of Zionism, wrote this book in 1943. I remember it standing on a shelf in my home as a child and that my parents attached importance to it. There are good questions about the accuracy of his brief mention of Akka, but these incidents, minimally, should alert us to what may be hidden by terms like “periphery.”

One thus might also speculate about “global” connections that go back in history. Boum notes that Jews were enmeshed in personal networks—*m’arfa*—that linked them to Muslims in matters of trade, protection, and other kinds of interdependence (p. 35). In rural Tripolitania, the *ma’aruf* of a Jewish peddler could be a Muslim who provided him lodging as he made his way from village to village across the countryside. It seems reasonable to guess that this is an ancient term that entered into the institution of *ma’arufiya*, known from rabbinic writings in early Ashkenaz, that bolstered the monopoly enjoyed by established families with regard to trade in certain goods or in their connection to gentile clients. Can the fringes of the Sahara provide insights relevant to early stages of Jewish settlement in other times and places?

Remaining within Muslim realms, the book presents and analyzes eleven legal documents involving Muslims and Jews, made available to the author by families in the Akka oasis. The legal-economic concepts in them are comprehensible in terms of the work on medieval documents done by Shlomo Dov Goitein and Abraham Udovitch. In addition to such formal knowledge, Boum’s discussion (chapter 2) benefits from his ethnographic grasp of the proximate social-economic contexts. We are given an intricate portrait of the setting of Jewish life, while this detailed study of local and regional-based sources also constitutes an expansion of approaches to Moroccan historiography more generally.

The value of these newly exposed documents does not detract from the sometimes serendipitous findings of ethnography. In discussing the former Jewish residents, a *haratine* named Moha, who was more than eighty years old, recalled to Boum how he “used to take manure from the house of Rabbi Youssef to the fields” (p. 64). This seemingly isolated bit of information links up with what I once heard (in Israel) from a man from the High Atlas when I asked him if Jews paid rent for living in mud-brick houses that were built on tribal land. He said no, that such houses might be offered to Jewish families under tribal protection, but then volunteered that Jews provided manure—i.e., fertilizer—to the fields of their Muslim

patrons. Many Jews engaged in the trade of cattle, keeping them on the ground level of houses while the family lived in the second story, and then selling them on a future market day. Over time, the cumulating manure had to be carried to the fields. After describing this, my interlocutor paused and then supplied another level of explanation. The Jews contributed a lot, he added. They were the ones who made the area fruitful, and made it grow. This reflexive recollection resonates with a Moroccan proverb cited by Boum relating to local trade: “A market without Jews is like bread without salt” (pp. 13-14).

I offer this triangulation of details to highlight how researchers who have been dependent on information gathered from residents of Israel, far from their original homes in Morocco, will welcome the contribution of an anthropologist who combines direct access to a region with the sensitivity of a person who has known it from childhood. Boum’s disciplinary habitus brings him to search for ethnohistorical materials from any direction possible: recollections of local people, legal documents in Arabic, newspapers, and the observations of transient outsiders. While some investigators have developed knee-jerk resistance to any source of information tainted with “colonialism,” Boum explains the principle that guided him: “While absolute truth might not be available to humankind, knowledge and deliberate ignorance are incompatible” (p. 4). His merging of devoted data gathering with critical reflection serves him well in his exploration of how memories of life with Jews in Akka, and “knowledge” about them, have evolved since Jews left the area.

For example, in a discussion with a young person relating to the Holocaust, the interviewee claims that Boum is biased: “I am sorry, but you just refuse to acknowledge that Jews are untrustworthy because they fund what you do.” The anthropologist replies that his research entails “showing the world what people, like you, think about certain issues. I do not hide my funding agencies, and I told you that since 2004, and do not shy from mentioning it.” When asked whether he agrees that the Holocaust took place, the youth continues: “[Adolf] Hitler did kill some... But there is no way that six million Jews were lost during WWII” (p. 150). This method of letting the reader hear more than one voice is used productively throughout.

For another example, in considering the role of the Internet, Boum indicates that, on the one hand, many young people, with both Islamicist and secular leanings,

see the Moroccan and other Arab governments as manipulating the Palestinian issue to distract attention from corrupt leadership. On the other hand, Berber students have argued “that these policies have legitimized the economic marginalization of the poor regions of southern Morocco.” Amazigh (Berber) students, Boum states, “re-volt against the pan-Arab and Islamic foundations of the Moroccan nation-state” (p. 140). This stance keeps many of them attuned to the historic place of the Jews in Moroccan society.

A final striking instance of such diversity of opinion is Ibrahim Nouri—assigned in the research to the grandfather generation—who independently set up a small museum in Akka named after his grandfather, Cheikh Omar, to show different aspects of the region’s history and culture (chapter 5). Prominent in the museum is the history of Saharan Jews which also highlights the multiethnic character of southern Morocco. Not everyone agrees with Nouri’s stance, but the museum eventually earned

some official recognition. While presenting the various views, Boum then moves us to the national plane and a consideration of the recently established Jewish Museum of Casablanca. His relentless analysis shows the intricate course followed by the government in downplaying the visibility of the museum vis-À-vis local pressures that oppose the place given to Jews (and by implication to Israel), while not relinquishing the desire to present Morocco to the West as an open pluralistic society. While it is clear that Boum is on the side of openness, he steadfastly lets the facts on the ground shape his ethnography and analysis, at times supplying hopeful surprises and at others, discouraging cul-de-sacs. It is clear that Boum’s book stems from a story in progress: a monograph set under the star of dialogue.

Note

[1]. Vanessa Maher, *Women and Property in Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 13.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Harvey Goldberg. Review of Boum, Aomar, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41364>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.