

Morocco  
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# Meat and Society in Colonial Fez

In 1937, Haj Alla al-Qadmiri intoned 'Bismallah' (In the name of God) up to one hundred times in the course of a night's work.<sup>1</sup> Qadmiri was an imam of the municipal slaughterhouse of Fez. Placing each animal on its side, he slit its throat from ear to ear while uttering this blessing. After the ritual sacrifice, butchers, also Moroccan Muslims, prepared the animal for sale by removing its skin and dressing its meat. Qadmiri's job seemed an age-old tradition, but it was an innovation dating to 1912, when the French established the Protectorate of Morocco.

Colonial officials collected taxes on each animal slaughtered at the municipal slaughterhouse. Qadmiri's sacrifice ensured that meat offered for public sale was licit for consumption by the city's 121,000 Muslim residents. In this way, the French profited from concessions made to the religious practices of the residents. When Qadmiri acted as imam, the taxes paid by butchers accounted for 10% of the city's income.<sup>2</sup>

French policies had repercussions far beyond their administrative and fiscal intentions. Administering public facilities and collecting taxes were seemingly trivial accoutrements of bureaucratic modernity. Nonetheless, the colonial regulation of the meat industry transformed the way that the social classes of Fez conducted daily life.

## Meat consumption in pre-colonial Fez

Before the French Protectorate, meat played a different role in the lives of the residents of Fez. The élite privately sacrificed animals. The Sultan, his entourage and wealthy notables paid butchers to visit them at home, where they dressed the meat and prepared it as a meal. Working households rarely ate meat, while the poor depended on charitable acts by the wealthy.

When executed for *al-ʿid al-kabir* (Great Sacrifice) the butcher's workaday practices represented faith, power and prosperity. For the holiday, residents purchased livestock and dissected it, as did a butcher. They also mastered the rites of sacrifice, which served symbolic purposes. In rendering meat *halal*, or permitted for Muslim consumption, a patriarch stressed his religious authority. In Fez, the pre-colonial capital, sacrifice also became linked to the exercise of temporal power, for residents sacrificed only after the Sultan's public sacrifice. A household then distributed as much as two-thirds of the meat to the poor, creating relations of dependence while publicizing its benevolent prosperity.

Such traditions influenced the butcher's trade because the élite displayed their privileged status by sacrificing at home throughout the year. A private sacrifice demonstrated respect for a guest while calling attention to a household's wealth. Thus, when dining in private homes, foreign diplomats invariably ate *mechoui*, ram roasted on a

spit. Residents also sacrificed bulls or camels at home to make *khelia*, dried meat stored in fat and spices. Descendants of families long established in Fez draw attention to this delicacy's social meaning. The sight of meat drying on a terrace, insists Abdelali al-Ouazzani, 'gave authority to the house'.<sup>3</sup> Wealthy households paid butchers like Gialli Rabani for his services in readying the *mechoui* or *khelia*, not for the sale of meat.<sup>4</sup>

Most residents could not purchase livestock, but a butcher did not profit from the sale of meat. A local proverb identifies meat as a consumable luxury: 'If you pass the night without meat, you wake up without debt.'<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the possession of meat aroused popular envy. In 1878, protesting tanners pillaged a tax collector's house, taking his stock of *khelia*.<sup>6</sup> An average family ate meat twice a week, unless a crisis raised the cost of living. Thus, in 1880, after three years of drought, tax receipts collected from commercial butchers decreased by a third.<sup>7</sup> In a like manner, butcher shops closed in 1906 when regional conflict doubled the price of livestock.<sup>8</sup> The butcher Moulay al-Haj Alaoui endured the uncertainty of his trade. Eleven years before the Protectorate, he moved from Fez because he did not earn enough to feed his children.<sup>9</sup>

## Colonial modernization

In developing meat as a commodity, the French transformed the butcher's trade. They respected Islam by naming people like Qadmiri to the post of imam at the municipal slaughterhouse. Colonial policies, however, altered the role of meat in Moroccan society.

Colonial administrators increased the number of sacrifices offered by the poor for *al-ʿid al-kabir*. This policy advertised French respect for Islam and the Sultan, a descendant of the prophet. Three weeks before the holiday, the French temporarily lifted prohibitions on the slaughter of young animals to 'permit poor families to buy sheep intended for sacrifice'.<sup>10</sup> Colonial authorities also exempted holders of an official declaration of poverty from paying the taxes collected at the purchase of a sacrificial ram.<sup>11</sup> By facilitating the active participation of poor Moroccans in religious celebrations, colonial officials jeopardized patron-client relationships while undoubtedly raising popular expectations in regard to meat consumption on a daily basis.

If French officials honoured the Great Sacrifice, they demonstrated equal enthusiasm in preventing the élite from sacrificing at home for ordinary meals. In 1912, administrators fined butchers working outside the

slaughterhouse. Two years later, the Commandant of the Region prosecuted a merchant who privately sacrificed three cows. Administrators then decided to imprison butchers who assisted private slaughter. Notables might apply for permission to slaughter at home, but they paid a tax aimed at the 'well off part of the population [...] who sacrifice choice animals for making dried meat'.<sup>12</sup> Municipal administrators associated *khelia* with 'clandestine slaughter', thereby denying a request by the Indigenous Chamber of Commerce to eliminate taxes on livestock from private farms. In 1922, administrators even pursued Driss Zemrani, the Sultan's Assistant Chief of Protocol, who sacrificed two bulls at home.<sup>13</sup>

The establishment of the municipal slaughterhouse demonstrates the care taken by colonial authorities to make commercially butchered meat acceptable to those who had previously sacrificed at home. Construction of the municipal slaughterhouse began in 1914 at Bein el Mdoun, the centre of the walled Moroccan quarters. The municipality included European Christians and Moroccan Jews, but the French designated this facility exclusively for 'Muslim use'.<sup>14</sup> Wooden lintels with arabesque in the slaughtering chamber, where the imam performed his sacrifice, as well as beamed ceilings duplicated features of the élite's courtyard houses. As construction began, administrators built a butcher shop with tiled walls and a marble butcher's block to act as a model to others in Rsif, a nearby market with an exclusively Moroccan clientele.

Ultimately, the French desire to increase colonial revenue underpinned the development of meat as a commodity. In France, taxes on meat served only to maintain a city's slaughterhouse.<sup>15</sup> In Fez, the French used this tax to generate income for wider purposes. Colonial administrators raised existing taxes on meat only five months after the Protectorate's establishment. In 1917, after the municipal slaughterhouse had operated for a year, the Chief of Municipal Services identified taxes collected at the facility as 'one of the most important budgetary funds'.<sup>16</sup> That same year, taxes contributed to assisting Moroccan workers, such as six craftsmen producing traditional embroidery in a municipal workshop, which, in turn, permitted them to buy meat.<sup>17</sup>

After 25 years of colonial rule, the French intended to authorize only 21 men to sacrifice according to Islamic law.<sup>18</sup> Colonial officials respected the Muslim identity of the urban majority in Fez, but their regulation of the butcher's trade transformed meat's social significance. As the French fostered demand for commercially butchered meat amongst the rich and the poor, they did more than better the butcher's lot. Prohibiting routine slaughter at home, colonial officials suppressed a time-honoured prerogative of the élite. At the same time, but for the sacrifice of *ʿid*, they facilitated the independent access to an influential luxury amongst the poor. In addition, the financing of employment programmes with revenue generated from the municipal slaughterhouse permitted wage earners to consume more meat. Thus, the colonial development of the meat industry in Fez decreased the prestige of notables, while increasing that of the destitute and working households.

## Notes

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- BGA, A1074, Concours, 1 March 1936.

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