Ben M’sik: Creating Community in Casablanca

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As you can see, I live on a popular block where there is the souk, the public oven, the public bath. And there are of course my dear neighbors. On my block, I meet my neighbors every day. We exchange visits on happy and sad occasions. You can’t feel loneliness on this block or on any other popular block of this neighborhood. It is not like the other rich blocks of Casa where snobbish and selfish people live. Jabrane M’barka, Ben M’sik resident.

For many centuries, history has been essentially concerned with the achievements of kings and heroic military leaders and focused on great civilizations such as the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks or the Romans, to name only a few. However, ordinary people fall into oblivion on the grounds that they are vulnerable humans leading an ordinary life. The present article aims to pay tribute to some of these mortals in that their greatness is to be found, paradoxically, in their simple life. The attempt “to write history from below” will certainly provide a new perspective. To illustrate this point, I will focus on the Ben M’sik community of Casablanca, Morocco, in order to see its contribution to the rise of Casablanca and its active role in the modern history of Morocco.

The importance of the present article stems from the fact that it will focus on a specific community—not one based on colour, ethnicity or religious belief, but rather on socio-economic and geographic position. Casablanca attracted migrants who were drawn to the city by the promise of a better future. The Ben M’sik people have formed a community. They share some characteristics that have shaped their identities, their ways of life and their vision of the world.

The present article attempts to use a multi-disciplinary approach. It will apply historical, sociological, economic and anthropological approaches while trying to answer questions related to the everyday life of this community. Therefore, this article seeks to provide a historical background to a specific geographical location, Chaouia. Second, it aims to discuss the socio-economic factors leading to the emergence of Casablanca as a modern city in the beginning of the twentieth century. Third, it attempts to discuss the social, economic and political circumstances that helped create this neighbourhood.

The Chaouia region

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1 I am grateful to the students of the Department of English and American studies who distributed a questionnaire among the Ben M’sik residents. This questionnaire comprised 24 questions about the social life in the Ben M’sik neighborhood.

2 Annual Meeting of the National Council on Public History, 2-5 April 2009-Providence, Rhode Island, USA.
The term “Chaouia” does not only refer to an area of land but also to a set of tribes settling in a big part of the old “Tamassna”. It is bordered in the north-west by the Atlantic Ocean, between the Charrat River and Oumm Rbi River. Its surface area stretches over 11,000 of square kilometres. The Charrat River separates Chaouia from the tribes of Zaers and Beni Khiran. In the south of Chaouia, one finds Ourdigha and Beni Maskin. Their regions in the west are contained by the Oumm-Rbii River.

Different groups of people from Chaouia claim that the term Chaouia came from the Arabic term "Shwiya", which means that people of this area were few. The name has not changed ever since despite the fact that it is today one of the most densely populated areas of Morocco. Some say that the name Chaouia was taken from the word "Shewa", which means “grilled meat” because the population of the area was famous for grilling sheep and for their hospitality. Others claim that Chaouia is a distorted word of the Arabic appellation of Chehawna, which is a tribal alliance. It includes Oulad Ziane, Madiouna, and Oulad Ali. The other tribal alliance is Oulad Bouatiya, which combines Oulad Hrize, Medakra, and Mzab. The last one is Oulad Bourzgue, which includes Oulad Said, Oulad Bouriri, Oulad Si Ben Daoud, Zemamra, and Beni Maskin.

The Birth of Casablanca:

Abou Hassan Gharnati, famous by the name Ibn Saïd, asserted that Anfa in the 13th century was a small commercial harbour known by its commercial relation with Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Anfa was considered the regional capital of the larger area of Tamassna. The city harbour was also famous for its pirate activity. The Portuguese King decided to destroy Anfa because it was a fortress for the pirates. In 1468, a Portuguese Armada of 50 boats and 10,000 soldiers attacked the town and destroyed it completely. The population had left or, in other words, escaped from the city. The Portuguese soldiers plundered all the wealth of the city and burned it. The town was mostly deserted for nearly three centuries. In the 18th century, on his visit to this site, Sultan Sidi Mohammad Ben Abdellah found that the whole town was completely destroyed except one mansion, known by the Spanish name of “Casablanca.” He was told that the Arabic translation of Casablanca was Dar-El-Beida (the white house). He gave orders to rebuild the town and chose for its new name Dar-El-Beida. Therefore, new towers, mosques and social and economic institutions were built.

The Sultan Moulay Abdurrahman sustained the efforts of his predecessor. In 1830, Casablanca progressed through slow but steady commercial development. Some foreign merchants opened their commercial agencies in the harbour. For instance, in 1862, the Nicolas Paquet Company, a French sailing Company, made Casablanca’s harbour a station for its ships. Moreover, this company created permanent lines between Casablanca and Marcilia. In 1885, under the Sultan Moulay Hassan I, the harbour’s activity was developed, which had a positive impact on the development of export and import. Noting this change, some Moroccan merchants came from Fez and Marrakech to settle there.

The Pre-Colonial Period:


4 Space and History : Chaouia (الشاوية التاريخ و المجال) Group of Authors. Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences – Ben M’sik. 31 July. Moroccan Publisher-Casablanca. p.42

5 Ibid., pp.,50-51
Casablanca before the French Protectorate (1912-1956) was a small town, divided into three distinct blocks. First, “Medina qdimā” is the site which the Sultan Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah built at the end of 18th century. He fortified its walls, built a mosque, a “medersa” (a traditional school), a public bath and public ovens. Second, the “Mellah”, in the south and south-west of the town, is the place where Moroccan Jews lived. Attracted by the mercantile activities of this new town, the Jews of Morocco migrated to Casablanca. In 1926, Casablanca became the first Jewish town of the country. Third, the “tnaker” area, in the north and north-west, was a semi-urban space where the first waves of migrants from the neighboring regions settled in. The emergence of an industrial zone, at the beginning of the twentieth century, attracted a cheap work force deserting the poverty of the countryside.

Colonial Casablanca:

The turn of the century, especially under the French Protectorate, was a turning point in the history of Casablanca. Lyautey decided that Casablanca would be the biggest Moroccan port. Lyautey chose Casablanca because of its strategic position on the Atlantic Ocean. It is surrounded by the rich and fertile land of Chaouia, Tadla, and Doukala. It is near the phosphate mines of Kheribgua.

Casablanca’s potential as an economic powerhouse attracted new men and money. For this reason, France chose the general Lyautey to make this new Casablanca a “prestigious witness for French energy and initiative” and to guide the city toward its Franco-Moroccan destiny.

Lyautey started his work by developing new facilities for the port and encouraging French companies to settle in Casablanca. This initiative attracted workers from the neighbouring regions. The city’s population increased. Because it was fortified by a wall, like any other Moroccan city, it quickly became too crowded to provide accommodation for the new immigrants. Therefore, Lyautey chose the experience of the architect Prost who readily applied Lyautey’s principles of dividing the ethnic communities. Prost also built huge arterial roads that are crucial to modern circulation. There were three major objectives in this master plan. First, it aimed to develop a structured road network so as to create some order out of the random subdivision. Second, it sought to institute zoning regulation with respects to high restrictions and public health. Third, it attempted to set out the boundaries of major functional zones in accordance with European standards.

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7 In 1907, the Jewish community living in Casablanca was 5,000 inhabitants. In 1951, it reached its highest number 74,783. In 1926, it represented 27.2 per cent of the Moroccan population and 18.2 per cent of the whole population of Casablanca.
8 Lyautey and the French Conquest of Morocco.
9 Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey (17 November 1854 - 27 July 1934) was a French Army general, the first Resident-General in Morocco from 1912 to 1925 and from 1921 Marshal of France.
10 Before coming to Casablanca, Prost was laureate of the Grand Prix of Rome and won the first award of the International Competition of Anvers.
Prost’s plan aimed to maintain a segregation of housing so as to have two cities within Casablanca: one for the Europeans and another one for the Muslims. Thus, Prost built a modern city similar to any European capital with big avenues, cafés, restaurants and different facilities. He also built another city, “medina jadida”, for the Moroccans. This city is similar to “medina qdima” in design and architecture and is similar to any ancient Moroccan town (Fez, Rabat or Marrakech). Prost’s plan to keep the European population apart from the Muslim one failed due to some practical social, economic and human reasons. From 1936 to 1952, the migration towards Casablanca took on important dimensions, especially because of the successive years of drought in the countryside (1936, 1937, 1939 and 1945) and because of the economic boom Casablanca witnessed after WW II.

In 1945, Michel Ecochard, after Prost had left Morocco in 1923, came up with radical proposals that suited Casablanca’s major expansion as a port city. Work resumed on the port facilities in 1949, forming part of an ambitious program to rebuild the initial section of the breakwater and extend it to 2,900 meters, by raising the underwater structures and creating a jetty for ships in dock.

The colonial authorities asked M. Ecochard to conceive another urban plan for Casablanca. Ecochard suggested a plan which had to take into consideration the chaotic development of the town. To control rural migration to Casablanca, priority was given to adjacent rural communities. Accordingly, Ecochard suggested the extension of the town towards Mohammadia. However, his plan failed and Ecochard left Morocco in 1953.

Casablanca after Independence:

The 70’s witnessed the creation of a Ministry of Housing and Urbanism. The Moroccan government launched an ambitious program to build houses for the emerging middle class, a dynamic force in the development of the city. Casablanca attracted successive waves of migrants from all over the kingdom. The Moroccan authorities were unable to control this social phenomenon and to establish an effective policy due to the ineffective coordination resulting from an inadequate administrative decoupage.

The Grand Casablanca:

To redeem the situation, Casablanca was divided in 1981 into five big prefectures (1)Ben M’sik – Sidi Othman, (2)Aïn Chock- Hay Hassani, (3)Casablanca-Anfa– Aïn Sebaa (4)Hay Mohammdi and (5)Mohammadia Zenata). In 1985, the sixth prefecture, Derb Sultan-El Fida, was created. The aim of this new administrative organization was to create emulation between the different prefectures for a better urban management.

Casablanca has become a home for nearly one seventh of the Moroccan population and is host to all vital activities in the country. Casablanca has become the headquarters of major national banks and businesses as well as major multinational companies. Also, because of its population and its neighbourhoods, it has become the largest city and the chief port in the country. In short, Casablanca is today the economic capital of Morocco.

Therefore, Casablanca has become a microcosm of Morocco, where different ethnic groups (Arabs, Amazigh, and Jews) co-exist with different dialects, cultural backgrounds, and traditions. With five million residents, it is the most densely populated of all of Morocco’s cities, one fifth of whom live in the Ben M’sik neighborhood.
A City of Neighborhoods

The city’s large urban spaces were divided into administrative units that became known collectively as Grand Casablanca. The Wilaya (a supra-prefectural structure) coordinates the needs of these expanding suburban areas and their growing populations. Suburban districts often share the same values and problems. Ben M’sik and Sidi Othman, for many years, had substandard houses that suffered from overcrowding. Sidi Moumen is a commune inhabited by almost 170,000 inhabitants. Sbata suffers from the high population density and lacks adequate economic, social, and cultural infrastructure. Commerce and industry are the main economic activities in the Moulay Rachid neighborhood. Residents of these neighborhoods are hard working, faithful to their rural backgrounds, and venerate multi-generational families. Despite the difficult conditions, writers, painters, musicians, and political leaders have emerged from these areas, often drawing attention to the marginalization of these districts. Today, efforts are being made to build decent houses and establish basic services.

Ben M’sik:

Located in the east of the economic capital of Morocco, Ben M’sik is the prototype of the marginal suburban district, lacking in major social and cultural infrastructure. From all over Morocco, migrants, who moved to Casablanca seeking better opportunities, found it necessary to settle down first in this area. In addition to this, the last decades witnessed massive migration from the neighboring regions (Chaouia and Doukala) due to the successive years of draught.

Ben M’sik is one of the six administrative districts of the city of Casablanca, covering 27% of the city. In 1982, 640,000 people lived there; by 2004 it had grown to more than one million. The neighborhood first attracted migrants flocking to the city. It has been undergoing important changes since 1980. Social, educational, and cultural institutions have helped create a sense of neighborhood identity. The local authorities have launched a plan to find adequate solutions to the various problems facing the inhabitants of this district. Thus, serious efforts have been made to improve the social conditions of the resident population and to increase their sense of belonging to the area they live in.

For more than 50 years, the word “Ben M’sik” has been closely associated with the biggest slum in Morocco. Considered a marginal neighborhood, Ben M’sik has long been denied appropriate infrastructure necessary for decent life. Mohammad, a Ben M’sik resident, says,

I have been living in Ben M’sik for more than 30 years. I had lived in Fez before. This neighborhood knew important social, economic and intellectual changes. Economically, migration played an important role in the making and development of this neighborhood. Intellectually, before the 80’s, illiteracy was rampant and the rate of children going to school was small. Socially, human relationships were strong as there was good solidarity between people. Although there are still some aspects of this solidarity among people, we witness a decline in human relationships.11

The residents of Ben M’sik had to wait until 1981 to see that this neighborhood has become a prefecture. Therefore, the 80’s were a turning-point in the life of the residents of

11 Questionnaire.
Ben M’sik. They became the centre of interest of the highest political authority of the kingdom. With the financial help of the World Bank, a decision was taken to eradicate the slums and build adequate houses for the people of Ben M’sik.

The project, which started in 1982, aimed to create a new town, Hay Moulay Rachid, to provide accommodation for the largest slum population of the country. Thus, 13,500 houses were built and given to 80,000 people. The new town Moulay Rachid stretches over 350 hectares. It comprises a zone of green spaces (15 ha), a villa zone (31 ha), a collective habitat zone (30 ha) as well as an industrial zone (35 ha). Two faculties (faculty of Letters and Human Sciences and Faculty of Sciences), a big stadium, a Cultural Centre and other socio-cultural institutions were built to complete the infrastructure of this new town. An architect and witness of this urban metamorphosis that the neighborhood of Ben M’sik has undergone states:

We must be aware that with the programmed disappearance of Karyan (slums of) Ben M’sik, a part of the memory of Casablanca will disappear, too. How to occult this memory of a city in the city? It is during all its existence, Casablanca did truly write the history only during one short period, that of the fight for national independence. Let us only say that the Karyan (slums) accommodated the anonymous authors of a good part of the anti-colonial episode of Casablanca, and that they always preserve some of the secret files of armed resistance. One day, we should write the social history of Karyan Ben M’sik and Karyan Central. This history is to be described as annals of pioneers.12

Local Personalities

“Because Ben M’sik is a suburban neighborhood, some people think it is inhabited only by thieves and outlaws. What they don’t know is that judges, teachers, and doctors are born and brought up in Ben M’sik.” – Jabrane M’Barka, Ben M’sik resident13.

The Ben M’sik neighborhood in Casablanca has contributed to Morocco’s national identity in the areas of sport, arts, and literature. A number of Moroccan politicians, including those from the Oukach and Ben M’sik families, come from Ben M’sik. This suburb played an important role in the struggle for independence from French colonization. Ben M’sik has always played a distinguished part in the artistic life of the country. The popular music, known as ‘Aaita’, flourished in this area. In the 1970s, new musical groups like Nass Al Ghiwan focused on transmitting musical heritage to Moroccan youth. Ben M’sik has contributed more talented athletes than almost any other neighborhood. Famous football players played either for Raja, Wydad, Ittihad Al Bidawi, and Majd Sidi Othmane who compete in the football national league.

Solidarity in Ben M’sik:

Solidarity is a social phenomenon that brings the people of Ben M’sik together as a community living in one place and sharing the same social and moral values. There are different occasions when neighbors are almost spontaneously involved to provide help to each

12 Quoted from “Ben M’sik Réhabilitation d’un Quartier Périphérique »

13 Questionnaire.
other. Mohammed, who has been living in Ben M’sik for more than 30 years, asserts: “The true and original people of this area are nice and kind… on this popular block, a neighbor looks after his neighbor as there are strong human relationships but in other areas, especially in the modern buildings of several floors, every person lives in his own flat and doesn’t care about the person who lives next door.”

a) Death of a neighbor:

The death of a neighbor is a loss to his family as well as to the whole community. Therefore, all neighbors believe that they are concerned and try to help with the different aspects of the funeral. For the first three days, it is the neighbors who are supposed to cook and provide accommodation for the relatives coming from the countryside to present their condolences. They also collect money to pay for the different rituals related to the funeral. It should be pointed out, however, that no sum of money is fixed. Each neighbor gives an amount of money according to what he affords. Jbili Khaddouj, who has been living in Ben’Msik since 1986, says “when someone dies, all the neighbors (teenagers and adults) help with the funeral. Neighbors open their houses to receive the family of the dead. Women prepare “couscous” to feed people who come to attend the funeral.”

b) Religious celebrations:

Muslim festivals are another occasion where solidarity between the members of Ben M’sik community is clearly manifested. At the end of Ramadan, there is a celebration called ‘Eid El fitr’. Neighbors give ‘Fetra’, some money, wheat or barley to the needy. They also buy clothes for the children of the poor families because during ‘Eid’ all Muslim children are expected to be happy and wear new clothes.

‘Eid El Kebir’ also referred to as “Eid Al- Adha”. Any Muslim, who has financial means, is supposed to sacrifice a sheep as a symbol of Ibrahim’s sacrifice. According to the Islamic tradition, the meat must be divided into three shares, one for the poor, one for the relatives and neighbors and the last to keep for the family. The essence of Eid Al Kebir is to share the joy of this celebration with the poor. In Ben M’sik, for instance, this spirit of solidarity is powerful. Mohammed says: “What I like best about our neighborhood is congeniality, friendship and solidarity between people. For example, in Eid Al Kebir (Sacrifice Celebration) neighbors collect money and buy sheep for the needy families who can’t afford buying sheep.”

c) Schooling:

Another event that requires solidarity between the people of Ben M’sik is the school start. Neighbors collect money to buy school bags, books and copybooks to the needy families. Sometimes, a neighbor would give his children’s used books to his neighbor. Exchanging second hand books is a common practice in this community since most families have limited revenue.

d) Other celebrations:

14 Questionnaire.

15 Questionnaire.

16 Questionnaire.
Solidarity between neighbors is also manifested in celebrations such as weddings, circumcisions etc...Neighbors lend their furniture, utensils and even help with the different preparations. Unlike sophisticated urban areas where only the invited guests are welcomed, in Ben M’sik almost any member of the community can attend the celebration and take part in the entertainment provided. Jbili Khaddouj says “in the ceremony of circumcision, the child rides a beautiful horse. He is followed by people who sing different Moroccan songs. In some cases, he is followed by people from Zaouia Issaouia who chant religious songs. They take the child to the mosque for prayer before the circumcision takes place. Women wear their best traditional costumes: “kaftans” and “takchita”.

The social life of the Ben M’sik community is full of festivities and symbols that reflect a rich heritage and history. I believe that it is possible for us as scholars to do research to look for documents and to collect testimonies of people who have contributed both in the making of this neighborhood and in the fight for national independence. The history of Ben M’Sik is mainly found in the drawers, cabinets, and closets of its residents. Ahmad Kabil wrote in the book *Chaouia: Space and History*: “I wish also that the government authorities, especially the Ministry of Culture would . . . give awards to people who own old photos and paintings portraying the Moroccan political history or the social and intellectual life.”

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17 Questionnaire.

18 *Space and History: Chaouia*, p.221