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Morocco: A Unique Migration Corridor

At the edge of the Muslim world, Africa, Western Europe, and the Atlantic – Morocco is situated at the confluence of distinct social, political, economic and cultural currents. Its geographic location is fixed at the borders of Africa and Europe. Its cultural orientation sits at the boundary of the Muslim world where it meets the West. Its history as a colony of Spain and France places it a mere thirty miles from the continent of its dual colonizers. And, its economic status sets it where the South meets the North, where the Third World meets the First. Due to these exceptional circumstances, Morocco is a major transit point for people from a wide assortment of backgrounds on their way to a variety of places.

Migration is a fact of life in Morocco and although the directions and reasons for the migratory flows have changed over the years, the flow has remained steady despite attempts to thwart it. In the colonial era, foreign migrants flowed into the territory and out to other colonies. Following independence, the flow of migrants shifted back toward the colonizers. In more recent times, migrants from other parts of Africa have used Morocco as a transit point on their way toward Europe. In analyzing these migratory flows, the particular historical, political and socio-economic circumstances of Morocco and its migrants, both native and foreign, must be evaluated to understand why they occur. Likewise, its geographical location is of extreme importance in any analysis of

these migratory patterns. The historical and geographical peculiarity of Morocco is precisely the reason it becomes a migratory corridor for people. Social, historical and economic circumstances have victimized these migrants and enticed them both into and out of Morocco.

Despite its proximity to Europe, Morocco was relatively isolated from the West in 1900 prior to its colonization. It “remained virtually closed to European influence” (Cohen 2004:38), which may account for why most visitors from Europe found that there was “an astonishing difference between the European and the African shores” (Porch 1982:12). Many Europeans perceived the country to be somewhat backward as many first hand accounts note the exotic and strange nature of the place. Henry Selous in 1910 speaks of “a stench so powerful and nauseating as almost to be possessed of beauty”, while Walter Harris notes the variety of languages with strange accents and guttural tongues (Porch 1982:13). By exoticizing these “Others” in the South, Europeans sought to distance themselves from the Africans culturally, creating a savage that could and should be civilized. Such attitudes remain relevant to current migrations as barriers are erected to protect “Fortress Europe” from these “Others”.

In 1900, most of the population of Morocco practiced subsistence agriculture; though Berber and Jewish merchants operated on trade routes and pirates gained considerable income for the ruling sultan (Cohen 2004). The territory itself was “fragmented internally into Berber...and Arab tribes differentiated through lineage [and] divided by language” and religion (Cohen 2004:38). It was a country mainly “because the sultan said it was” (Porch 1982:5). What one might have found in Morocco prior to European colonization was a country in name only. Various groups and factions existed

in a network of intertwined communities – its status as a unified entity was not yet realized.

Oddly, the proximity to Europe allowed the area to be the last colonial project in Africa as European rivals failed to agree on the terms of colonization (Porch 1982). As it was the final area of African colonization, it was a unified entity prior to colonization because “it was virtually the only patch of Africa which had yet to be absorbed” by European empires. Morocco was “a cartographic anomaly, an untidy splash of noncolonial independence” (Porch 1982:5). Morocco became a rather unconventional area, with an unusual history precisely because of its proximity to the colonizing powers of Europe. This proximity was to play not only into its history as a unique colony, but also as a unique country in its post colonial state.

Understanding the colonial history of Morocco is essential to the analysis of its migratory flows. As a colony of both France and Spain simultaneously, Morocco is unusual as a country with dual colonial legacies. Its’ proximity to Spain, thirty miles across the Straights of Gibraltar, likewise makes it unique (Porch 1982). Colonization of the area began with the Spanish-Moroccan War in 1860. The Spaniards reward for victory was a sum of “100 million pesetas on the makhzan” or the ruling council, to be paid in foreign currency (Porch 1982:18). This drained currency reserves and inflation ensued along with increased taxation. Likewise, imports of cheap commodities from elsewhere put many craftspeople out of business and migration to the northern coast began, creating a landless proletariat that was to continue into the present day (Porch 1982).

Europeans flooded the northern coastal areas of Morocco in the 1880's and Tangier was virtually abandoned by the makhzan and the sultan except for diplomatic officials (Porch 1982). The Spanish protectorate eventually gained control of but remained in the northern part of the country while the French wrangled with other European powers for the right to colonize the remainder of the territory. Following the Spanish design, the French created the Bank of Morocco in 1907 to control the country's finances and to ensure repayment of forced loans (Eickelman 2002). France reached an agreement with the other European powers and troops were sent from Algeria to "supervise" the rule of the sultan in Fez in 1911. French settlers began migrating to Morocco along with commercial enterprises such as railroads, banks, mines and agribusiness. To "educate" the population in how European enterprises were run, land was seized from Moroccans to operate these enterprises thus increasing the size of the landless proletariat (Eickleman 2002). Migration to Morocco by the colonizers displaced local communities and forever altered the character of the area by depriving locals of the means of self-subsistence and turning many into a class of landless workers.

Morocco is now experiencing many of the same growing pains as other former colonies of the European powers. Following resistance to French rule, Morocco gained independence in 1956 (Eickleman 2002). Spain also acknowledged Moroccan independence one month later with the exception of five small presidios and the Spanish Sahara (Howe 2005). However, a month after the Treaty of Fez was signed, Prince Moulay Hassan stated:

Independence is just the beginning of our problems...We've got to start all over and build a nation out of chaos. In forty years, the protectorate succeeded in sapping our national strength and natural resources and left us in a vacuum with only the throne to cling to (Howe 2005:90).

The problems in Morocco have in fact continued due to this colonial legacy. Despite independence, indebtedness to foreign banks has been constant. "External debt reached \$11 billion" in 1983 which was 70% of the gross domestic product (Rhazaoui 1987:141). Further, in order to pay such debts, Moroccan agriculture focused on export crops beginning in the 1960's. Cash crops used up a majority of the arable land and grain had to be imported to the area for the first time in history to feed the population. By the 1980's half of all cereals were imported, which were inevitably more expensive than locally grown grain, and estimates put malnutrition amongst the population at 30-60% in the 1980's (Swearingen 1987:160).

The lack of self-sufficiency in agriculture and foreign debt created problems for the majority of Moroccans. The government had low currency reserves and 8,600 government jobs were eliminated adding to an unemployment rate of over 29% (Rhazaoui 1987:142). Due to the colonial legacy, landless workers needed to find wage labor elsewhere. Emigration to Europe began to increase in the early 1960's. Documented Moroccan migrants in France jumped from 3,900 in 1961 to 11,000 in 1963 (1965). Numbers have continued to rise in France and elsewhere as families and individuals struggle to find the means to feed themselves. Moroccans comprise the largest group of foreign workers in the European Union (Huntoon 1998), which is fundamentally due to geographic proximity and easy access to Spain as tourists (Bodega, Cebrian, Franchini, Lora-Tamayo, Martin-Lou 1995). In 1986, the number of

Moroccans in Spain alone was calculated at nearly 95,000 (Bodega et al. 1995:808), and significant numbers of Moroccans are found throughout Europe and North America.

Channels and routes of migrants have changed over the years as border crossings have become increasingly difficult. The Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the North African coast create the only land borders between Africa and Europe. The Spanish conquered Melilla in 1497 and Ceuta is a mere 90-minute ferry ride from the Spanish mainland (BBC September 3, 2005). Both enclaves are heavily fortified to prevent the flow of illegal migrants as well as hashish and other illegal goods. Although you can see Spain across the water from Morocco on a clear day, the sea crossing is dangerous and many have died while crossing in “rubber dinghies, old boats or on inflatable inner tubes” (Bailey 2005:BBC).

The impact of migration on Moroccan society has been profound. On the other side of Melilla sits the Moroccan border town of Nador. Anthropologist David McMurray did extensive fieldwork in the province of Nador in 1986 and 1987, a region that has historically been associated with smuggling. In 1910, a Parisian officer was disturbed to find that despite the lack of European control over the Rif region where Nador is located, “a thriving smuggling business in European products, particularly arms [and] ammunition” existed (McMurray 2001:xiii). Nador has continued as a smugglers cove into the present day and smuggling of hashish and people persist despite Spanish attempts to thwart it. People from the region have been emigrating for the last century and a half, first to colonial Algeria and later to Western Europe (McMurray 2001:xiv). McMurray documents the stories of migrants from the region and investigates its effects on the town. The flow of European money and goods upsets the social balance as the

migrants return creating a new nouveau riche class. An informant of mine described similar effects in his hometown of Beni Mellal further south:

There was so much money flowing back in the city from the immigration to Italy, there's (sic) so many cars - you think (of) yourself in some sort of Fifty-Cent (An American rap artist) video, or some hip-hop video, the cars and the music and the way they are dressed and the money they can spend. Most of them are from the countryside so they don't have any notion of banking or financial use. They bring the cash in bags and that's really impressive. You think it's some sort of hip-hop video with the guy in the nice car and the cash and stuff. (2006)

McMurray states "Emigrants destabilized the status system by uncoupling the urbane, wealthy, educated connection that had underwritten higher status in Nador. The emigrants...often represented a difficult to absorb composite of illiterate, rural and rich" (2001:64). My informant's description of his own town would seem to concur with McMurray's conclusions.

Since McMurray's work, the migration at Melilla has shifted dramatically from a purely Moroccan migration to a pan-African one. The non-Moroccan migration through Morocco is a relatively recent phenomenon. As economic conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa have worsened, often due to colonialist legacies, people are willing to take great risks out of desperation. This often involves crossing the Sahara Desert, usually from West Africa, and camping in Moroccan forests while waiting to attempt the dangerous crossing. Moussa Sakho from Mali left his Moroccan forest camp, headed toward the border and he:

took a ladder fashioned from branches and whatever else he could get his hands on and tried to get over the imposing double fence topped with razor-wire which separates Morocco from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. (BBC September 29, 2005).

Moussa and others from Sub-Saharan Africa undertake such endeavors because they feel they have no future in their home countries. Moussa "dreamt of being able to find a job where he could earn enough to support his family and maybe buy a few luxuries, like a television or even a car. And he thought he could only do this in Europe - or 'Eldorado'" (Winter 2005: BBC September 29). Simon Fortu of Cameroon tells why he is in Morocco:

I am 19 years old and left Cameroon on 21 May 2005. I got to Melilla one week ago. My journey is quite short compared to other people's. I stayed two months in the forest. When you're in the forest you don't have peace of mind. One day police come with helicopters, the next the gendarmes. You are always running, running, running. I left all my family behind in Cameroon because we are poor. We don't have anything. I decided to be a better person so I could lift them up in the future. I told them that I was going to Europe so they sold our family land and gave the money to me. That was our only family land. The money took me to Morocco. I'm not disappointed to be here in the camp. I know I must first stay here sleeping in a tent, but I know that one day I will be sent up to big Spain. That's where I will start up my own life. I will do anything in Spain, any job at all. I don't intend to go back with empty pockets. I would look like less than an ant. My family would say I squandered their money for nothing. That would be a very sad and painful encounter. (BBC October 14, 2005).

As times have grown increasingly difficult in countries elsewhere in Africa, migrants have risked everything to get to Europe where they believe they can find decent wages to feed their families. Since Morocco is the only African country with a European land border, it is the primary passageway to the EU for sub-Saharan Africans.

Across the double fences from Morocco is the European Union and greater economic opportunity. Spain detained more than 15,000 people who arrived without identity papers in 2004 alone. In 1992, an agreement between Morocco and Spain required Morocco to supervise uncontrolled migrant flows through its territory toward Spain (Bodega et al. 1995). A major source of political friction between Spain and

Morocco "has been the entry of third-country nationals into Spain through Morocco, through the enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, as well as by boat across the Strait of Gibraltar" (Huntoon 1998: 439). Prior to 1992, immigrants from countries that Spain did not have extradition treaties with were simply released into Spain and thus the greater European Union. Due to the volume of illegal immigration, Spain decided to use its accord with Morocco to deport such persons back to Moroccan authorities for processing. They have also reconstructed the fence to make it higher, scheduled for completion in February, 2006. In addition they are adding a third barrier of mesh steel wire to prevent injury when people try to scale the fence (Bailey 2005:BBC).

Despite the attempts to control this migration, desperation causes many to attempt the crossing. On October 6, 2005, the governor of Morocco's northern Nador province, Abdellah Bendhiba, said that six men "died during an assault of rare violence by some 400 immigrants trying to enter Mellilla overnight" (BBC). The migrants had attempted to rush the gate in a desperate move to get into Spain and the EU. Even though 290 were arrested and six killed, many implied they would continue to try to get in. Patrick Thomas of Gambia was desperate to cross:

In Morocco it's very hard to live. No food, no place to sleep. And the police when they catch you they take your money from you, they torture you and in prison they only give you half a piece of bread each day. My arm is bandaged because I caught my arm on the barbed wire as I was climbing over the fence. And the Moroccan police beat us. The Spanish police just catch us and take us back. In my country people live in poor conditions. If you're like me and your parents are not alive and you are taking care of your sisters, you must try and come to Europe. I was studying agriculture and economics in Gambia. My father died and my mother was taking care of my schooling but then she died. Then my older sister took care of me but three years ago she had an accident and she also died. So now I'm the only one taking care of my family. I have no one to help me, but a lot of people I must help. I have four sisters and three brothers living there. When I am in Europe I will help them so they can continue their education.

I am willing to risk my life to get to Europe. I can't see any other solution. (BBC October 14 2005).

The Spaniards maintain the appearance that they are not part of the problem by sending the migrants back to Morocco where Moroccan police are expected to remedy the situation. After finding several hundred migrants abandoned in the Moroccan desert including pregnant women and children, an aid agency claimed Spain was acting in violation of basic human rights stating, "the sending back of immigrants as agreed by Spain and Morocco to a country which does not have minimal capacity to receive them violates Article Three of the (UN) Convention against Torture" (BBC October 7 2005). Having economic problems of its own, Morocco lacks the capacity to receive refugees. These migrants are also a threat to Morocco's survival as a country economically reliant on labor exports and it handles them accordingly.

This new migration has created problems for Moroccans, who unlike members of other former Spanish colonies in Latin America, do not receive preference in obtaining or renewing work permits in Spain (Bodega et al. 1995). However, Laura Huntoon notes that "in the past the Spanish need for seasonal immigrant labor dovetailed nicely with a soft border with ally Morocco" (1998:439). Spain needed Moroccan agricultural labor and having a soft border facilitated their needs. With the new influx of excess labor from other countries through Morocco, the border has become more impermeable. Visa requirements for Moroccans began in 1991 and the flow of Moroccans was reduced "to a small number of youths risking their lives" in small boats headed across the Strait of Gibraltar. Many died before reaching Europe. (Bodega et al. 1995:807-808). My informant noted that when Algerians or people from war torn or politically

unstable nations go through Morocco on their way to Europe or North America, they could claim political asylum. He explained, "Moroccans don't have any problems. The country is politically stable." The border guards and immigration agencies will ask "Why are you here. Go back." So Moroccans will often hire smugglers. Two friends told him about being smuggled across the border. They:

went through a big sewage type canal. And then you cross it and you are in Ceuta. Just for the passage, you want to go through it; you have to pay fifty bucks. When you are there they have a house that you rent and they stick all the immigrants there and they feed them mostly beans and stuff like that...The Coast Guards are involved because there are many people doing it, especially in the summer (2006).

Like the migrants from West Africa, Moroccans also have difficulty obtaining enough money to live and as they have been migrating to Europe for half a century, they know how to get in and out with greater ease.

In 2005, an NGO found more than 500 migrants "abandoned in the Moroccan desert after being expelled from Spain's North African enclaves. The migrants said they had entered or tried to enter Ceuta and Melilla but were forced back, loaded onto trucks and driven to the Algerian border" (BBC October 7 2005). A Nigerian migrant reveals how the smugglers deal with the non-Moroccan migrants. The migrants are deported back and forth across the Algerian border and the migrants are forced to pay to get back in:

The Moroccan gendarme will wait till evening when it is dark. Then we are pushed to the Algerian side. Sometimes - if you have a telephone or other things - the Algerians will take it, before directing us back again, saying : 'This is now Morocco, you go back.' So, we go back to Morocco. It is just a circle - a merry-go-round. The Moroccans are making a profit. We call them connection men. If you imagine about 400-500 people being deported - and you calculate that each individual pays 200 euros (\$240) [to get back] - you see how much money that is.

This is going to the Moroccans in the border town of Oujda. They are doing the connection for us to come to Rabat, Tangier or Ksar [El Kebir] - wherever our destination might be. So you discover that getting these [migrants] and deporting them to Oujda beefs the economy of Morocco (BBC October 12 2005).

The price for the non-Moroccans to be smuggled appears to be much higher than for natives as the smugglers appear to take full economic advantage of the precarious political status of the new migrants. With an increasingly impermeable border with the EU and a lack of an effective labor market for their own population, some Moroccans are finding money wherever they can get it.

Spanish admission into the EU plays a role in this fiasco. The implementation of the 1985 Schengen Agreement that gave Europe a single border created "a 'fortress' Europe which erect[ed] a wall to the 'South'" (Bodega et al. 1995:801). Spain's geographic location at the southern edge of Europe influences the immigrant mix in the rest of Europe and "some of the northern members are concerned that 'too many' non-EU nationals will enter a borderless Europe through an 'unprotected southern flank'" (Huntoon 1998:437). Spain follows the European immigration policies that allow freedom of movement within the European Union countries "but restrict the entry of nonmember country populations, especially those of the Third World" (Bodega et al. 1995:807). Europeans are not anxious to allow poor populations of "Others" into their own territory despite the fact that a century earlier they were more than willing to upset the balance of these societies with their colonial endeavors. Thus Spain is under pressure from the rest of the EU to find ways to stem the flow of immigration from the south.

Spain's negotiations with Morocco to control this immigration are further hampered diplomatically by the fact that Morocco does not recognize Ceuta or Melilla as Spanish territory and has been asking that they be returned to Morocco since 1975 (BBC July 19, 2002). Therefore, Morocco prefers to be non-cooperative with Spain's concerns. However, as Morocco is reliant on Spain and other European countries for development aid they must comply with Spain's requests to a certain degree. This aid doesn't address the problem directly, "although it may provide an additional incentive for Morocco to control such migratory movements" (Huntoon 1998:440). Conflicts over even smaller pieces of territory have been common. In July of 2002, a small island classified by one local as "no more than a rock" 200 meters from the Moroccan coast was "invaded" by a few Moroccan troops who were forcibly removed by the Spaniards (Irvine 2002:BBC). Diplomatic tension over territory will likely continue as long as Spain retains these enclaves, and "rocks" on the North African coast.

Spain also faces difficulty from its citizens over these migrations. With unemployment high in Spain and the rest of Europe, many Europeans see immigration negatively affecting them. Even though most immigrants tend to find jobs in menial labor, this is often unacceptable for Spanish workers. Although Spanish employers get an inexpensive labor force, "the native lower-class workers are affected by the direct social and economic competition represented by immigrants." (Bodega et al. 1995:800-801). David Coleman believes "Europeans...do not normally regard themselves as belonging to large-scale countries of immigration" (1992:414). Despite the fact that Europe is in population decline, unemployment is still high and the need for unskilled labor from outside Europe is therefore deemed low. Coleman also presumes that "the

resumption of large-scale immigration to Europe, especially from the Third World, is opposed by all European governments, who believe they are responding to the wishes of their electorates" (1992:416). Migration of Moroccans and others from the "Third World" is not accepted by Europe, despite the fact that many are poor due to the inequities of European colonialism. Laura Huntoon notes, "Xenophobic behaviors and high European unemployment suggest that immigrant entry will be limited in the European Union in the future" (1998:441).

Migration has been a constant theme in Moroccan society for well over a century. The colonization of Morocco and other parts of Africa set in motion a displacement that could not be undone. The nations of Europe are reaping the effects of what they have sown over a century ago – the economic benefits, as well as the drawbacks of refugees. When Europeans migrated to Morocco and confiscated land and resources they deprived people of their means to subsistence. When the population became landless and needed to enter the labor market, the Europeans had no idea it would come back to affect them a century later. As the economic inequities between the populations of Europe and Africa progresses, mass migration of economic refugees through Morocco and toward the European fortress will likely continue. Part of what puts Morocco in a unique position in this mass migration is the fact that "the contrast between the social-economic development of Western Europe and that of North Africa...is quite dramatic because of their proximity" (Bodega et al. 1995:800).

This discourse of what constitutes development and underdevelopment echoes European sentiments from over a century ago when they exoticized these "Others" to the south. What many Europeans fail to acknowledge is that this economic disparity is

a direct result of the effects of colonialism. Income levels between Africa and Europe are often much less than one-tenth of those in Europe (Coleman 1992:413). Moroccans and other Africans were subsisting for millennia before Europeans arrived and deprived them of the means of subsistence. By restricting the movements of these migrants, Europe is engaging in “clearly discriminatory measures taken against economic immigrants who...involuntarily become illegals” (Bodega et al. 1995:807). Some believe that “Third World countries appear unable to create new jobs, at any level of income, to match their own natural [population] increase” (Coleman 1992:413). However, they usually lack the means to create such jobs precisely because Europeans have pressured them into debt for well over a century. Such debt is crippling to the economies of Morocco and other former colonies and prevents them from spending on their own populations. As the majority of their populations are members of a landless proletariat, often due to colonialism, they must migrate where they can find wages to support their families.

The effects of chronic indebtedness and the colonial projects on Morocco have been profound. As Moroccans have transitioned economically from self-sufficient pastoralism and agricultural production to export crops and wage labor in the global marketplace, it has affected every aspect of Moroccan society. Where pastoralists and subsistence agriculturalists once existed, now there are only migrants. The population has been stripped of its means of subsistence and its land, being forced to engage in the exportation of labor and cash crops. Morocco is now a country that functions economically due to remittances from migrant labor. The absence of these migrants in the society has altered its character. Children grow up without fathers and mothers

function as single parents for most of the year. Lyrics from a Moroccan recording artist of the late 1960's speak to generations of Moroccans: "I don't have an enemy, except the boat from Melilla. It has taken my lover, it has left me an orphan" (McMurray 2001:101). Migration has taken lovers and spouses away from home, left children near orphaned from parents, and left the migrants themselves orphaned from their families and their homes. Without a clear economic strategy to alleviate the inequities that create the need for mass economic migration, Moroccan social life is likely to continue to revolve around the loss of its citizens to economic migration.

To alleviate the problem, some suggest investment and "reasonable" debt renegotiation to create an economic takeoff south of fortress Europe (Bodega et al. 1995:801). The banking industry of the West is unlikely to agree to what is "reasonable" for the countries of the South, as the inequity will continue without the elimination of such debt. Chronic indebtedness of Third World nations to Western banks has been a predominant feature of the global system in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. With the resolution of such indebtedness and inequity unlikely, economic refugees from the South are more than likely to continue banging on the doors of fortress Europe. Morocco is the land at the gate of this fortress and it will likely have further problems with its own population as well as the entire population of Africa. Morocco sits at the border and is representative of a widening economic gap between the Third and First World.

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