

THE EVOLUTION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON MOROCCAN JEWS: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRENDS, INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORIES, AND EMERGING RESEARCH AGENDAS

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ABSTRACT

The study of Moroccan Jews has attracted growing attention from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural scholars over the past decades. All the same, much of this research has centralised principally on legal status, economic activities, and Jewish-Muslim relations during the colonial period. Against this background, the article reviews the evolution of academic scholarship on Moroccan Jews and delves into the main intellectual trends that have shaped the field as the years go by. To be precise, it explores the contributions of large-scale scholars such as Mohamed Kenbib, Haim Zafrani, Abdelkébir Khatibi, and Simon Lévy, whose work has helped deepen our perceptions and understanding of Moroccan Jewish history, identity, and cultural memory. Likewise, the article discusses recent debates encompassing multiculturalism, heritage preservation, and the place of Moroccan Jewish culture

in public and educational discourse. While existing studies have provided valuable insights into the historical experiences and contributions of Moroccan Jews, important gaps remain in areas such as curriculum studies, cultural representation, and educational inclusion. Therefore, this review argues for more interdisciplinary approaches that move beyond traditional historical and legal perspectives to include questions of identity formation, multicultural education, and cultural recognition. Conclusively, the article points out the need for future research that reflects the complexity of Moroccan identity and the diverse cultural traditions that have contributed to its formation.

Key words; Moroccan Jews; historiography; Moroccan identity; multiculturalism; cultural heritage; cultural memory; educational inclusion; cultural representation; Morocco.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this article is to investigate the place of Jewish cultural elements in the Moroccan primary curriculum and its impact on national identity formation. As such, a comprehensive literature review is needed to determine how Jewish culture has been represented and what facets remain unexplored. This investigation is also important because it will help identify gaps and opportunities to improve cultural representation in Moroccan education, ultimately helping create an inclusive educational system that honours and values the nation's diverse cultural heritage.

This literature review identifies research that examines the integration and representation of Moroccan Jewish cultural elements in education. First, it examines the evolution of academic research on Moroccan Jews. This section outlines key studies and their connection

to understanding the historical and cultural dimensions of Moroccan Jewish identity. Second, it reviews research on Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan education. Recent literature is synthesized in this section by referring to the place of these elements in educational content. Third, it assesses efforts to integrate Moroccan Jewish culture into education. This section focuses on strategies and challenges related to incorporating Jewish cultural elements into the Moroccan educational system. Fourth, it discusses international experiences in how to manage cultural diversity in educational contexts. This section brings practical examples from other countries that address multicultural educational issues and provide lessons that are related to cultural inclusivity. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings and shows their relevance to the research focus.

The Evolution of academic research on Moroccan Jews

This section looks at the evolution of academic research on Moroccan Jews and their contributions to Moroccan society. It covers the history of their cultural, social, and economic roles, as well as their resilience and adaptation over time. It also considers how this body of research accentuates the importance of preserving their heritage as part of Morocco's multicultural identity.

We addressed in chapter 1 the image of Jews in different contexts. We attempted to emphasise the general features that form these perceptions about the Jewish other. In this chapter, we will try to shed light on some aspects of the image of Moroccan Jews through a new book on Moroccan history authored by a prominent group of Moroccan researchers, commissioned by the Royal Institute for Historical Research in Morocco.

Before delving into that, we see it necessary for this research to provide a general overview that reflects their perception within broader traditional discourse. This indicates that the Jewish identity has often been approached by researchers from varying fields, and to demonstrate this, some references and indicators will be presented to support these observations.

The generalizability of much of the published research on this issue poses challenges. In general, many studies conducted on Moroccan Jews focus primarily on the colonial period Mohamed Kenbib (1998). Among them is the study of the legal status of Jews within the framework of the Muslim majority and the establishment of protection under specific conditions, which placed the Jews under a specific category. Additionally, the studies focused on the relationships between Jews and Muslims, as well as the social and economic roles played by Jews in Moroccan history. These roles included professions, commercial dealings, and diplomatic contributions, alongside attention to their relations and comparisons with the "Alliance Israélite Universelle" and Europe (Kembib, 1998). Thus, much of the existing research remains confined to historical legal and economic frameworks.

While these studies offer a broad view of Moroccan Jewish conditions, this simplified historical reading stems from colonial historiography rooted in the "Eurocentric colonial school." This approach, with its colonial methodology, focuses on conflict between Moroccan Jews and Muslims, emphasizing the colonial role in shaping and exploiting minority communities. However, despite their limitations, some studies from this period provide important data on Jewish Moroccan history.

Moroccan Jewish culture holds significance which a history spanning over two thousand years. Jewish communities lived and participated actively in Moroccan society. They remained resilient through various changes. In his major study of Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life in Morocco, Zafrani (2005) explores this long history. He presents the contributions of Jewish people to social and cultural life in Morocco. They also played an important role in economic development. The book describes how Jewish traditions blended with local customs. This mixture led to new languages, art forms, and ways of living. This history demonstrates how Jewish communities adapted and contributed to the country's cultural and economic development. Preserving and honouring their legacy remains essential.

Zafrani (2005) also discusses the important role of Moroccan Jews in the country's development. He focuses on their influence in trade, governance, and cultural preservation. His article, *The Jews of Morocco*, features their contributions to Moroccan history. It also shows their special role as a link between Morocco and the global Jewish diaspora. He (2005) explains the peaceful relationship between Jewish and Muslim populations in history. He gives a clear view of how their cultural exchanges shaped Moroccan identity. These works together help us understand Moroccan Jewish history and culture. They show why preserving this heritage is important in discussions about multiculturalism and inclusive education today.

Adding Jewish history and culture to the Moroccan primary education curriculum marks an important step in recognizing the country's multicultural heritage. According to *The Times of Israel* (2020), this is the first time an Arab country has included Jewish history in social studies. This change is considered as part of a larger political will to enhance cultural diversity and prevent the loss of historical narratives in Morocco. The teaching of Moroccan Jewish history and other cultural elements is a way to create a sense of shared heritage and respect among students, showing the multiple identities that shape the nation.

Also, Forward (2020) explains that the inclusion of Jewish history to the Arabic-language curriculum shows Morocco's dedication to keeping the Judeo-Moroccan culture at work. This change, apart from the fact that it is considered in historical accounts, it is also a means to further tolerance and understanding, locally and globally. Teachers and cultural leaders have praised this decision as an example of how schools can celebrate diversity and still preserve national identity. For example, the president of the Jewish community in Morocco, Serge Berdugo, has publicly expressed support for this initiative, emphasizing its role in

fostering interfaith dialogue. These efforts place Morocco at the forefront of including minority histories in education, setting a standard for other countries.

Abdelkébir Khatibi and Mohammed Kenbib are Moroccan intellectuals whose writings bring profound perspectives into Moroccan identity, cultural memory, and Jewish-Muslim interactions. Khatibi, a philosopher and writer, investigates the fluid nature of identity and the role of art in cultural expression. In his book *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy*, he writes, “Calligraphy is not merely an art form but a repository of memory and identity, transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries” (Khatibi, 1976, p. 42). His work shows how Jewish and Islamic traditions together shape Moroccan heritage, using art as a way to unite diverse identities. This theme of Morocco as a meeting point of cultures runs through his reflections.

Simon Lévy reflected on the role of Moroccan Jews in shaping the modern Moroccan nation, noting, “the majority Muslim community moved from a sense of community identity to a national feeling within the stable framework of a state, after five centuries of fighting against Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and French invasions. The Jewish minority, under the protection of Moroccan rulers, kept a local community identity, strongly connected to its city and *kéliha* (Jewish quarter)” (Lévy, 2011, p. 47). He further explained that it was only in modern times that Moroccan Jews began grappling with questions of national identity, driven by the conflicting influences of French assimilation, Zionism, and Moroccan patriotism (Lévy, 2011).

Lévy’s ideas show the complicated position of Moroccan Jews during colonial times and after. While Muslim communities shared a common fight against foreign powers, Moroccan Jews had to deal with different and often opposing influences. On one side, French colonial policies encouraged them to adopt French culture, which changed their traditional ways of living. On another side, Zionism encouraged a new Jewish identity that moved them away from their Moroccan roots. Also, Moroccan Jews were influenced by local patriotism, which called for loyalty to Morocco and its diverse cultural characteristics.

In early 2021, debates about the representation of Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan heritage were reignited by an episode of “Nass El Mellah,” a program broadcast on Med Radio. Presented by Zhour Rihihil, a historian and curator specializing in Moroccan Jewish cultural heritage, the program airs every Thursday from 6 PM to 8 PM and is dedicated to explore the rich history and contributions of Moroccan Jews. This episode focuses on the traditions and daily lives of Moroccan Jews. It includes interviews with people from different backgrounds who shared their memories, customs, and thoughts about the cultural ties between Jewish and Muslim communities in Morocco.

The episode stressed a range of topics, including the significance of Jewish religious holidays, the architecture of the Mellahs, and the shared culinary traditions that have become part of Morocco’s national identity. Listeners were introduced to stories of coexistence and cultural exchange, such as the role of Jewish artisans in Morocco’s craft industries and the

influence of Jewish musicians on Moroccan Andalusí music. These narratives painted a vivid picture of the intertwined histories of Jewish and Muslim communities in Morocco.

This initiative was praised embodying the depth of cultural ties between Moroccan Jews and Muslims. Some listeners praised Med Radio for boosting awareness of Morocco's concepts of diversity and supporting the country's constitutional acknowledgment of Jewish presence. Others, on the other hand, criticized the program for focusing only on metropolitan Mellahs, such as those of Casablanca and Essaouira, while disregarding the experiences of Jewish communities in smaller cities and rural areas. Critics also raised concerns about whether the program's celebratory tone sufficiently addressed the challenges faced by Moroccan Jews during certain historical periods, such as their marginalization and the large-scale migration of many families in the 20th century.

The debates surrounding "Nass El Mellah" reflect broader discussions about how to represent Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan education and public discourse. Much like Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Bitaqat Huwiya" sparked identity debates in the Palestinian context, this program reignited questions about the balance between celebrating shared heritage and referring to historical complexities. For Moroccan education, this example underscores the importance of integrating Jewish cultural elements in a way that is inclusive, regionally representative, and historically accurate, contributing to a thorough understanding of Morocco's diverse identity.

Most of these studies have focused on the cultural characteristics that distinguish this community and differentiate them from the veteran Jews who came from various regions of Europe. They also addressed issues of integration within Israeli society. In this context, Moshe Shokeid pointed out that the history and culture of Moroccan Jews received special attention from researchers with different specializations, particularly in the field of anthropology. A number of studies were conducted by researchers from Ben-Zvi Institute, supervised by distinguished professors, focusing on the folklore of these communities.

This section, in essence, explores the evolution of academic scholarship on Moroccan Jews. The investigation demonstrates the way Moroccan Jews shaped the country's culture through art, language, and social life, while simultaneously facing integration and endurance challenges. Including this review is essential as it lays the groundwork for incorporating Jewish cultural elements into education.

Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan education

The representation of Moroccan Jewish cultural elements in education

The main purpose of this section is to conduct theoretical and practical research on how Moroccan Jewish cultural elements are portrayed in educational materials and their potential impact on Moroccan identity. It is divided into three parts: (1) The development of scholarly views on Jewish cultural representation, (2) the inclusion of Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan textbooks, and (3) research gaps for further exploration. Although certain Jewish cultural elements appear in Moroccan education, they are rare and underexplored. Most

studies, in fact, focus more on language teaching than on broader curriculum content and cultural representation. This emphasizes the significance of bridging these gaps to advocate for diversity and tolerance.

To the best of our knowledge, there is very little research on the inclusion of Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan education, especially in public schools. Such elements may exist in some cases, but they are exceptional. Most studies in this area focus on language teaching. This leaves an important gap in understanding how Jewish culture is represented in the wider curriculum.

Hassan Ait Bouzid, in his 2016 and 2020 studies, looked at a small number of ELT textbooks to see how they support religious tolerance and global citizenship. Other researchers have approached different parts of the Moroccan curriculum. For example, Mostafa Hassani-Idrissi (2015) has focused on the formation of national identity in Moroccan textbooks, Laila Aboussi (2011) examined, for example, how Maghreb literature is used in schools. Mathias de Meyer also reviewed an elementary school textbook to understand the link between Islam and modernity.

Although previous studies hold out useful insights, there are still important gaps. None of these studies look at the representation of Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan education. Their focus is on ELT textbooks, national identity, Maghreb literature, and the link between Islam and modernity, leaving out Jewish cultural content. This creates a major gap in understanding how Jewish culture fits into the wider Moroccan educational system, especially in public schools.

Two important studies place at disposal in-depth analyses of Jewish cultural representation in Moroccan education. The first is a 2023 report by UNESCO IMPACT-se, titled "The Moroccan Curriculum: Education in the Service of Tolerance." This report explores how well the Moroccan curriculum elevates religious tolerance and global citizenship, with special attention to the inclusion of Jewish cultural elements. The second study is Abdullah Hamid's doctoral thesis (2016), *The Representation of Jews in the Moroccan Educational System*. He examines how Jewish culture and history are represented in Moroccan secondary schools. His research also plays up the role of inclusive education in promoting cultural diversity.

Abdullah Hamid's doctoral thesis examines how Jewish culture and history are portrayed in Moroccan school curricula. Hamid emphasizes the importance of having an inclusive representation of Jewish presence in Moroccan society. He argues that "inclusive education is key to the appreciation of Morocco's multicultural heritage and building a tolerant society" (Hamid, 2016, p. 45). Recent reforms have included Jewish cultural components but this inclusion is entirely limited and lack depth. In this regard, Hamid critiques this approach in educational materials and calls for a better integrated method that can focus on shared histories and cultural contributions and not on superficial aspects.

The study aimed to analyse Moroccan secondary school history textbooks and used a questionnaire to assess perceptions as well of teachers and students in secondary education yielded distinctive perceptions. The most notable finding of the survey was that less attention in history textbooks is given to Jewish history and Judaism. Only 2 % of the history teachers felt that it was addressed adequately whilst for about half, came across as inadequate and approximately 48% rated it average.

The study by Abdullah Hamid (2016), however, involves a comprehensive examination of the specific cultural elements missing from the representation. Although it calls attention to the limited portrayal of the Jewish component and Judaism, it does not explore the particular aspects of Jewish culture that may be inadequately covered. Inadequate representation of Jewish heritage in textbooks, such as the absence of language, customs, traditions, arts, and historical contributions, creates a major gap. This raises concerns about students' ability to understand the material, especially if they have little to no exposure to Jewish culture. Such omissions may result in misunderstandings or a lack of awareness among students.

The findings in this article confirm that Jewish cultural elements in Moroccan education are rarely included. Important aspects like language, traditions, arts, and history are often missing or briefly mentioned. This creates gaps in how Moroccan diversity is taught to students. To support a more inclusive identity, it is important to include these elements more fully. The study shows that improving the way Jewish culture is presented can help uphold diversity, respect, and shared heritage in Moroccan education.

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