

**LES JUIFS DU MAGHREB: NAISSANCE D'UNE HISTORIOGRAPHIE  
COLONIALE**

**Colette Zytnicki. *Les Juifs du Maghreb: naissance d'une historiographie coloniale*,  
Paris: PUPS, 2011.**

**Reviewed by: Maite Ojeda Mata, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona**

Colette Zytnicki<sup>1</sup> in *Les Juifs du Maghreb: naissance d'une historiographie coloniale* questions the writing of the history of the Jews of North Africa, that is, how that history was constructed. The work is thus dedicated to French historiography on the Jews of the Maghreb from the second half of the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. But the subtitle of the book can be confusing. Zytnicki does not address the issue of the colonial historiography of North African Jews, as the subtitle suggests. The author is interested in the historiography of the Jews from colonial Maghreb, which does not mean exactly the same, although there are similarities. Furthermore, Zytnicki is not limited to the historiography debates but incorporates the contributions to this issue from other emerging disciplines, such as sociology and ethnology. To perform this study she conducted a comprehensive bibliographic emptied not only of books published in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but also of scientific journals of the time, although limited to the French publications.

The book is divided into six chapters plus an introductory section and a conclusions chapter. The first chapter is dedicated to the first representations of Jews of North

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Africa. The lack of historiography writings on the Jews of the region (except by Ibn Khaldun) indicates the little importance that the Muslim elites of the south and the Christian elites from the north had granted to the North African Jewish population. We owe early histories about the Jews of the Maghreb to the travel literature from the seventeenth century. Zytnicki shows how it is built a stereotypical view of Jews from North Africa, usually loaded with European antisemitic clichés of the moment, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (p. 25 and ff).

Apart from the pre-colonial travel narratives,<sup>2</sup> the historiography of the Jewish past in Northern Africa itself began to proliferate with European colonial expansion in North Africa and the Levant during the second half of the nineteenth century. This issue is addressed in the following chapters. Chapter two, entitled "The entry of Jews in the colonial library", is mainly dedicated to French colonial Algeria, where the knowledge of Algerian Jews was important in the debate on granting French citizenship to them at the end of the nineteenth century. In short, the objective was to prove if the Jews of Algeria were fit and were prepared to receive citizenship from the colonial power (p. 94). The third chapter is devoted to "The question of origins" as a topic of scientific and political interest to develop an "indigenous policy", particularly in Morocco. This issue of origins is not anecdotal, as Zytnicki reminds us, since from this was depending the position of each group in Moroccan society. The Jews were especially interesting because this socio-religious group was seen as a possible support in the colonial enterprise. But despite the marginal presence of Jews in colonial literature, Zytnicki

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shows that there was no real interest in the history of the Jews of the Maghreb by non-Jewish authors. In addition, the versions on the subject were very contradictory.

While non-Jewish scientists focused primarily on the Arab and Berber populations, Jewish scholars were the first to take an interest in Jewish history. These Jewish producers in the history of the Jews of the Maghreb were also very heterogeneous. Among them were members of the science missions, scientists linked to Algerian or Moroccan universities, teachers in schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and learned rabbis. Zytnicki shows that while the history of the Jews of North Africa was written primarily by Jews during the colonial period, it was modeled on imported codes of the French metropolis (p. 176). They made a biased reading of the past based on the preconceptions of the time and often the ambitions for the future of these colonies. According to the author, certain historical facts appear disfigured and reflections and ideas on the subject are often wrong or false. Jewish authors also had interest in linking this history from a material, linguistic and ritual point of view with that of the Jews from France. They were mostly native Jews educated in French values who more strongly defended their membership in a "civilized" and emancipatory nation. They felt their mission was to "liberate" their coreligionists from "Muslim yoke" and old superstitions.

The chapters that follow focus on the emergence of new uses of the past. On the one hand, Zytnicki examines how, after the pioneering work from the field of history, in a second stage sociologists and ethnologists also showed interest in the Jews of the

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Maghreb. The privileged objects of study of sociologists and ethnologists were mainly North African Jewish neighborhoods, as the *mellah* in Morocco or the Tunisia *hara*, as they evoked in their imagination reminiscences of the European ghettos.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the author seeks to understand how and why history also proved important to the North African Jews themselves. Raised in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Tetouan and other cities, Maghreb Jews learned a new way of self understanding and their relationship with the world, beyond the *haras* and *mellahs*. The leading figure of this particular history, with which the book ends, was André Chouraqui. The work of Chouraqui closed a period in the historiography of the Jews of North Africa and, at the same time, laid the foundation for a new, more rigorous and more critical approach to the history of the Jews of the Maghreb.

However, after more than a century since the appearance of the first works on the history of the Jews of North Africa, this history, like the history of Jews in general, continues to be set apart from general history. Zytnicki's book gives us keys to understand why, also in North Africa, the history of the Jews is a separate one within the general history of the region. Ironically, while North African Jewish historians tried to link "their" history with general history, these histories have not yet been incorporated into the more general history of the region with few exceptions, like *Histoire du Maroc* of Michel Abitbol.<sup>4</sup> But this is another story...

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: J. A. Bolle, *Souvenirs de l'Algérie ou relation d'un voyage en Afrique pendant les mois de septembre et d'octobre 1838* (Angouleme: Imprimerie et Lithographie de J. Broquisse, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Joseph Goulven, *Les mellahs de Rabat-Salé* (Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1927).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Abitbol, *Histoire du Maroc* (Paris: Perrin, 2009).

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