

MOROCCO: A TRUE MELTING POT COUNTRY

DR MOHAMED CHTATOU

There is no doubt that Morocco occupies a strategic position in its region. As a matter of fact, it sits on the crossroad of many cultures, religions and civilisations, and has through centuries become a true melting pot of so many ways of life and human beliefs, not to mention, obviously, races and ethnic groups.

Because of this highly-interesting *brassage de cultures*, Moroccans have masterfully acquired the ability and the predisposition to accept the other, no matter how complex his difference might be and how alien his "otherness" is. Moroccans by nature are accommodating, open, friendly, available and very tolerant of other people and their cultures. But, their most important quality, by far, is their innate ability to welcome in other life experiences and cultural currents that obviously are not in contradiction with their entrenched beliefs; digest them and adapt them to their lives.

Likewise, they have interacted positively with the Phoenicians, the Romans and many other races and have made beneficial exchanges with them, and today we still witness vestiges of these human interactions in the language, the customs and the beliefs, and not to mention the remains of entire cities such as Volublis, Lixus and others.

As early as the 8th century, horsemen coming from Arabia brought with them a new monotheist religion to the region: Islam, and gradually converted Christian and polytheist Amazigh people, with the exception of the Jewish inhabitants, who kept their monotheist belief. In turn, the newly converted Amazigh, under the leadership of their able general Tarik Bnou Ziyad, crossed the strait that, since, was called after him, and spread Islam in the Iberian Peninsula, that remained under Islamic rule until the advent of the *reconquista*. After the fall of Grenada to the Catholics in 1492, both Muslims and Jews were kicked out of Spain and headed to Morocco where they found refuge. They were welcomed in by the locals and managed to prosper and occupy important posts in the government besides thriving in trade and finance.

Moroccan dynasties, after the arrival of Islam, grew in power and moved southward spreading this new religion in sub-Saharan Africa by persuasion and at times by subjugating the Africans. In so doing, they enrolled the locals in their armies and brought home many others as slaves. The African slaves, to keep their culture alive played in secret their music and practiced rituals of exorcism. Centuries later, when they were freed, the Gnaoua, as they are called locally, formed brotherhoods and travelled all over the country playing their music for subsistence. Today, their music and culture is gone global thanks to the yearly festival organized in Essaouira around May or June.

Judaism and Jews are as old as the country itself, until their massive migration to Israel on the aftermath of the creation of this state in 1948, they lived all over the country in villages, towns and cities on commerce, trade and finance. Because of their wide experience in international trade, Moroccan Sultans appointed them as their financial and commercial agents: *toujar sultan*. During the Second World War when the Nazi-

occupied France wanted to prosecute them, the late King Mohammed V resisted the order and called for the prosecution of all Moroccans, if this were to happen, on the ground that they are no different from his other subjects, of whose safety he was responsible.

At the turn of the 20th century, Morocco was subjected to European colonialism and the country was divided up between the French and The Spaniards who, over 50 years of Protectorate regime left a lasting imprint on the language, the culture and way of life of Moroccans, still vivid nowadays. Summarising the different external influences on Morocco, the late King Hassan II eloquently stated that his country is a tree that has its roots in Africa and its branches in Europe.

Today, Moroccans proudly highlight their multiple and composite identity: Amazigh, Arab, Islamic, Jewish, African, Andalusian and Mediterranean and their time-old tolerance and acceptance of the other.