

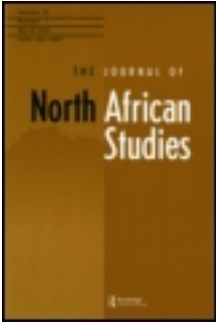
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### Medicine and the saints: science, Islam, and the colonial encounter in Morocco 1877-1956

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Medicine and the saints: science, Islam, and the colonial encounter in Morocco 1877–1956**, by Ellen J. Amster, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2013, 334 pp., \$60 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-74544-5

In her well-written and argued book, Ellen Amster introduces a new unit of analysis to the historiography of Morocco: the body, both ‘corporeal’ and as ‘body politic’. Drawing on French colonial archives, Arabic manuscripts, and personal interviews, she tells the story of the colonisation of the North African kingdom within a framework of medical encounters. This fresh approach allows here to weave together intellectual, social, scientific, gender, and political aspects of this important historical transformation into a single narrative. Moreover, the author integrates her own research smoothly into the already existing corpus of scholarly literature on Morocco during the modern era by directly contributing to several academic debates, for example, the impact of French military and cultural penetration during the nineteenth century, the history of the Alaoui monarchy, and the rise of modernist ideologies such as *salafiyya* and nationalism. Without adopting an overtly apologetic voice, Amster introduces the reader skilfully into the world of pre-modern Islamic practices and reconstructs the epistemologies of a belief system that has, though not disappeared, lost its hegemony over Moroccan society.

*Medicine and the Saints* ‘offers a history of Moroccan politics and sovereignty through the body’ (16), describing the ‘digestion of modernity, the physical internalisation of an epistemological, historical, and colonial war between French positivism and Sufi Islam to define the human being’ (4). The book’s primary focus is on saints who ‘embodied’ the functioning of pre-colonial Moroccan society, because they connected the faithful with the divine, constituting a source of *baraka* (blessing) that could be obtained by touching their clothes or praying at their graves. They held central roles in the local community, especially with regard to medical practices and healing, and often were the only ones capable of defying the political power of the *makhzan* (central government) and the Sultan. However, as France began to penetrate the North African kingdom economically, technologically, and militarily during the nineteenth century, the role of the saints weakened under this onslaught of Western modernity. Inspired by intellectual developments during the Third Republic, most French scholars and administrators opposed the ‘irrational’ and ‘primitive’ system of knowledge dominating Moroccan society, and instead wanted to bestow the blessings of ‘rational’ and ‘modern’ positive sciences on the native population. Even before the Treaty of Fez in 1912 finally give their project a legal justification, French physicians and advisers to the Sultan began to use medical and hygiene campaigns to control and discipline native bodies.

In order to counter the increasing influence of France, the native elites chose salafism as their new ideology, thus turning towards a powerful Islamic intellectual current inspired by Western scientific ideals. Both the Sultan and the quickly growing nationalist movement adopted a hostile attitude towards the heterodox practices of the local religious tradition, instead advocating

for a 'modern' nation-state held together by a 'modernised' Islam. By internalising French discourses on religion, they contributed to the demise of the Sufi brotherhoods. According to the author, 'in their efforts to define a scientific Muslim nation, North African nationalists thus continued the French modernist project in Islamic guise' (203). Furthermore, the institutional heritage of the Protectorate had a strong impact on Moroccan medical and welfare politics following independence in 1956, with many French doctors and social workers remaining to work for the new Ministry of Health. Far from constituting a radical rupture, the fields of medicine and welfare symbolised the intellectual and scientific continuity between the colonial and the post-colonial eras.

*Medicine and the Saints* has some weakness and inaccuracies. The author spends many pages explaining the contempt many 'enlightened' Frenchmen felt towards the *murabits* as community leaders and medical healers, but she fails to explain how the colonisers managed to dismiss their own intellectual objections and simply coopt the Sufi saints following the establishment of the Protectorate. Given the energy the author has spent setting up the rivalry between French positive sciences and local systems of knowledge, it seems inadequate to deal with the transformation of the former leaders of the anti-colonial resistance into allies of the Protectorate authorities in just a few lines (102). The Resident General managed to turn both the 'modern' salafi Sultan and the 'traditional' Sufi brotherhoods into pillars of the French colonial regime, thus performing an impressive balancing act that combined two radically opposing belief systems. Hubert Lyautey's wish to preserve the tenants of native society might have contributed to this decision, but it appears to be an insufficient explanation for this extreme intellectual contortion. Given the overall argument of this book, this section could have been treated in more detail. Moreover, there are small factual inaccuracies, for example, it was the Paris-based merchant Hajj Hadi Diouri, and not the nationalist leader Mohamed Diouri, who financed the *Association Marocaine de Bienfaisance* (182). However, these issues do not distract from the overall quality of her work.

As a political historian, I found it especially revealing how Amster shed new light on the intellectual development of the nationalist movement by incorporating this important part of Moroccan history into the larger framework of her research. Being familiar with some of the archival collections she uses, I appreciated her readings of the available primary sources. Although most of the events and actors dealt with in *Medicine and the Saints* are already known to scholars of Moroccan history, the author's approach uncovers new aspects and connections that have hitherto gone unnoticed.

Overall, Amster succeeds in her endeavor and provides a great read that sheds new light on the history of (pre-) colonial Morocco. The book is well-researched and provides convincing evidence to support the author's central arguments. Moreover, due to the thematic layout of the book, single chapters can be read individually and thus make for good teaching material. Hopefully, more scholars will follow Amster's lead and engage Moroccan history with contemporary debates on science, medicine, and the body.

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