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## HISTORICAL MIGRATION PATTERNS IN THE EASTERN RIF MOUNTAINS<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** The eastern Rif mountains are among the most densely populated regions of Morocco. This is not a recent development but one that can be first related to political and military events at the end of the 15th century: Iberian attacks on the Moroccan coast and the retreat of the urban population from the coastal cities to the countryside, immigration from Andalusia, and the struggle against the Spanish conquerors of Mellila.

The severe physical environment, with mountainous topography and scarce and irregular rainfall, is not favorable to agricultural production, and the paradox of this factor and the density of population has provoked several different hypotheses. However, little attention has been given to the impact of emigration, which has been a tradition in this area long before the flow of workers to Western Europe increased significantly in the 1960s.

Emigration from the Rif to the region of Tangiers began with the arrival of the Mujahidin (faith fighters), originating from the tribes in the eastern Rif during the second half of the 17th century, who helped to liberate Tangiers from English rule. This Rifian influx became more important at the end of the 19th century and during the severe drought of 1944–45.

The patterns of seasonal or temporary emigration towards western Algeria are more recent and, thus, are better known. They probably began around the end of the last century but increased in the 1930s, then ceased after the independence of Algeria in 1956. The Rifian emigration to the Zerhoun mountain area, also beginning in the 19th century, is less well known although it contributed to the peopling of the northern side of the mountain.

Emigration from the Rif from early times until present has functioned as a security valve and helped to prevent demographic catastrophes at times when harvests are poor; this is especially so because it is a seasonal or temporary movement. Moreover, although it is the men who seek employment outside the region, the birthrate has not been affected and demographic pressure has been a constant feature.

**RÉSUMÉ** *Modes de migration historiques dans les montagnes de l'est du Rif.* Les montagnes de l'est du Rif ont depuis la fin du 15ème siècle fait partie des régions les plus densément peuplées du Maroc. A cette époque, les attaques des Ibères sur les côtes du Maroc ont provoqué la retraite de la population urbaine vers l'intérieur du pays, les immigrants en provenance de l'Andalousie sont arrivés et les conflits avec les conquérants espagnols de Melilla ont sévi.

L'environnement physique difficile, avec sa topographie montagneuse et les chutes de pluie irrégulières, ne favorise guère la production agricole; le paradoxe de ce facteur et la densité de population a donné lieu à plusieurs hypothèses différentes. Néanmoins, l'impact de l'émigration traditionnelle qui a commencé bien avant que le flux de travailleurs vers l'Europe occidentale n'augmente considérablement au cours des années 60, n'a pas reçu l'attention qu'il mérite.

L'émigration des habitants du Rif vers la région de Tanger a commencé au moment de l'arrivée des Mujahidin (combattants de la foi) au cours de la seconde moitié du 17ème siècle; ceux-ci ont aidé à libérer Tanger de la domination anglaise. Cet influx de population rifaine s'est amplifié à la fin du 19ème siècle et pendant la terrible sécheresse de 1944–45.

Les modes d'émigration saisonnière ou temporaire vers l'ouest de l'Algérie sont plus récents et donc mieux compris. Ils ont probablement commencé à la fin du siècle dernier, ont beaucoup augmenté au cours des années 30, puis ont cessé après l'indépendance de l'Algérie en 1956.

L'émigration à partir du Rif, des temps reculés jusqu'à présent, a joué le rôle de soupape de sûreté et permis d'éviter des catastrophes démographiques à une époque où les récoltes étaient mauvaises, en particulier du fait que ce déplacement de population est saisonnier et temporaire. De plus, bien que seuls les hommes cherchent du travail en dehors de la région, le taux de natalité n'a pas encore été affecté et la pression démographique est restée constante.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** *Die Bevölkerungsentwicklung des östlichen Rif Gebirges aus historischer Sicht.* Seit Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts gehört der östliche Teil des Rif Gebirges zu den dichtbesiedeltesten Gebieten Marokkos, als iberische Angriffe auf die marokkanische Küste die städtische Bevölkerung veranlaßte, sich aus den Küstengebieten ins Inland zurückzuziehen, als Immigranten aus Andalusien kamen, und als es Konflikte mit den spanischen Eroberern von Melilla gab.

Die unwirtliche Umwelt mit gebirgiger Topographie und geringem, unregelmäßigem Niederschlag ist für landwirtschaftliche Produktion wenig geeignet, und daß sich dennoch eine hohe Bevölkerungsdichte entwickelte, hat zu vielen Hypothesen geführt.

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<sup>1</sup>This manuscript was received in French and translated by Dr. Seth Sicroff, Department of Geography, University of California, Davis.

Wenig Aufmerksamkeit wurde der traditionellen Immigration geschenkt, die lange vor der in den 1960iger Jahren erheblich zunehmenden Abwanderung nach Westeuropa begann.

In der zweiten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts gab es Auswanderungen vom Rif Gebirge in die Gegend um Tanger mit der Ankunft der Mujahidin (Schicksalskämpfern). Sie halfen, Tanger von der englischen Vorherrschaft zu befreien. Diese Zuwanderung aus der Rif Region verstärkte sich Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts und während der schlimmen Dürreperiode von 1944-45.

Saisonal bedingte oder vorübergehende Abwanderungen nach West Algerien sind neueren Datums und daher besser bekannt. Sie begannen wahrscheinlich zum Ende des vergangenen Jahrhunderts, nahmen in den 30iger Jahren stark zu und hörten nach der Unabhängigkeit Algeriens im Jahre 1956 ganz auf.

Seit frühester Geschichte bis in die Gegenwart diente die Abwanderung vom Rif als Sicherheitsventil, das demographische Katastrophen in Zeiten, in denen die Ernten dürrig waren, verhinderte; und immer nur eine saisonal- oder zeitlich begrenzte Aktion war. Obwohl es die Männer sind, die sich Arbeitsplätze außerhalb des Gebietes suchen, wurden die Geburtenziffern davon nicht betroffen und der demographische Druck ist unverändert.

## INTRODUCTION

The mountains of Morocco are relatively densely populated, except in a very few areas. This seems quite paradoxical when high densities are compared with the economic opportunities in the regions.

Among the hypotheses that have been advanced to explain this paradox is one that stresses the historical role of refuge during the invasions of nomadic tribes, and another which emphasizes the antiquity of the population (Noin, 1970).

Two regions are most often cited as examples: the western Anti Atlas and the eastern Rif. These areas have

for many years been sources of emigration to other parts of Morocco, and later to foreign lands. However, emigration has not resulted in the relief of demographic pressure, at least until relatively recent times; on the contrary, it seems to have increased pressure. To what extent might early emigration, by allowing access to outside resources, have enabled the eastern Rif to sustain heavy population pressure? And might the continued high birthrate be attributed to the fact that most emigrants were male? In this paper these questions will be discussed, using the example of the eastern Rif.

## OVERPOPULATED MOUNTAINS

### THE HARSH NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

To the east of the meridian of Al Hoceima, the relief of the Rif chain is much less pronounced than in the central Rif. Several summits reach about 2,000 m in the southern part but, on the whole, the mountains are low, and the altitude decreases towards the east. There are broad, flat basins within the mountain ranges and occasional valleys open out towards the Mediterranean coastal plain, as at Nekor. Nonetheless, the whole area can be subdivided into distinct units (Figure 1).

Towards the east the basins become more extensive and the landscape is that of plains crossed by a series of mountain chains, such as the Anti-Rif in the south and, towards the north, the volcanic Gourougou massif and the mountains of Beni Bou Ifrouir.

The special character of the eastern Rif may be attributed to its relative aridity. The climate is primarily influenced by the leeward position, sheltered from the prevailing westerly winds which account for Morocco's precipitation. The 400 mm isohyet, which includes only a narrow littoral fringe west of Al Hoceima, curves in towards the south to encompass the entire region east of this city. Notable differences appear, however, between the summits and the basins, and between mountain sides, according to their exposure to the humid easterly and northeasterly winds blowing off the Mediterranean. The basins receive less than 300 mm per year, while precipitation on the slopes varies between 400 and 700 mm.

Despite the unfavorable environment, the people of the Rif have learned to maximize income from the scanty

opportunities available to traditional agriculture: arboriculture on the slopes, extensive grain cultivation in the basins, small-scale livestock raising on the scant pasture lands that remain after intensive clearing which sometimes affects even the steepest slopes.

### HIGH POPULATION DENSITIES

Nevertheless, despite the harsh environment, population densities have been among the highest in Morocco for a very long time. The historical evidence is consistent on this point, even as early as the eleventh century (Moulieras, 1895; Leo Africanus, 1896; El Bekri, 1965).

Demographic pressure has fluctuated through time. This is certain, at least for the region of Mellila which, in the thirteenth century at the time of the Almohad expeditions, furnished large contingents of soldiers. In particular, the defeat of the Moslem troops in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 cost the lives of a great number of men from this region. From the middle of the thirteenth century until 1465, the country was ruled by the Merinides, a Berber tribe that arrived from the east, and these people, and other tribes who came with them, offset earlier population losses. At the end of the fifteenth century a large number of Moslems, evicted from Andalusia, disembarked on the coast of the eastern Rif, especially at the ports of Mellila and Ghessassa. The occupation of the city of Mellila by Spanish troops in 1497 contributed two-fold to the increase in population density: first, in forcing the urban populations from the occupied cities into the surrounding countryside and,

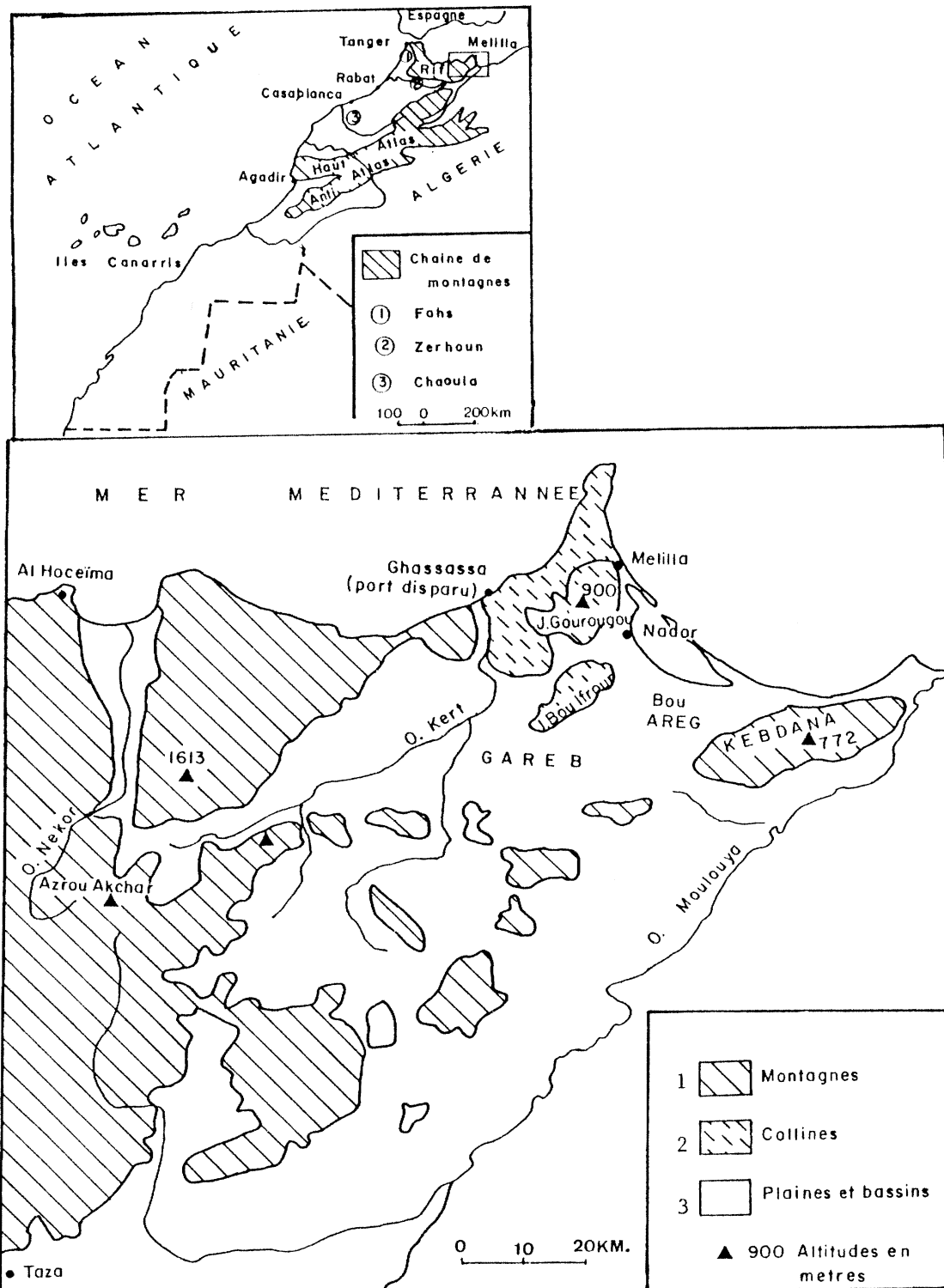


FIGURE 5. Location of the Rif Mountains: 1. Mountains 2. Hills 3. Plains and basins

second, in provoking the arrival of the Mujahidin (holy warriors) who came to take part in the struggle against the Spanish invaders (Leo Africanus, 1896).

It thus appears that the geographical location of the eastern Rif, open to the Mediterranean and near the principal route between Morocco and the central Maghreb,

would account for the strong demographic pressure to which the region has been subjected since at least the end of the Middle Ages.

Unfortunately, there are no quantitative data on population densities before censuses in the twentieth century. However, testimonies from European travelers at the end of the last century confirm that well before the demographic revolution experienced by Morocco after the beginning of this century, population densities in the eastern Rif were already quite high. They easily reached 60 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, that is, three times as high as on the

Plain of Chaoia (Noin, 1970). In 1960, the densities recorded in the eastern Rif were almost everywhere greater than 70/km<sup>2</sup>, and surpassed 100/km<sup>2</sup> in the districts near Nador and Mellila. In 1971 and 1982, almost all of the communities had more than 100 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>.

Confronted with these population densities, which are among the highest in Morocco, the Rifians have done everything possible to exploit fully the natural environment. Nonetheless, emigration was seen quite early as a vital necessity.

## ANCIENT MIGRATORY TRADITIONS

### EMIGRATION FROM THE RIF TO THE REGION AROUND TANGIERS (TANGER)

The first evidence of emigration from the Rif dates back to the seventh century. At this time throughout Morocco there was a thrust of mountain populations towards the lowlands (Amine *et al.*, 1967). Also, the tribes of the Rif had a tendency to move toward the richer hill regions that border them to the south.

The principal migratory movement that is documented involved the enrollment of Rifians in the *Guich*, that is, a system whereby tribes undertook to furnish armed contingents to the sovereign in exchange for farmland in usufruct as well as total exemption from taxation. During the reign of Moulay Ismail, these armies participated in the liberation of the cities of the northwest coast, including Tangiers, which was captured by the English after a long Portuguese occupation beginning at the end of the fifteenth century; Asilah, occupied by the Portuguese; and Larache, occupied by the Spaniards. The number of Rifian combatants who thus ended up by settling in the region of Fahs, around Tangiers, is estimated at between 2,000 and 3,000 men. While a great number of these combatants came from the tribe of Tamsamane, the other tribes of the eastern Rif were also represented: Guelaya, Beni Said, Beni Touzine, Metalsa, Beni Bouyahi, and Beni Ouriaghel. This in-migration had a profound effect on the population base of the city of Tangiers and the entire region: at the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of the douars (small settlements) of Fahs had a population entirely or partially derived from the Rif (Michaux-Bellaire, 1921). This was the beginning of the migratory movement between the Rif and the region around Tangiers at the end of the nineteenth century, causing Moulieras, a European traveler of the time, to report that Fahs was the "secular overflow of the Rif" (Moulieras, 1895). In 1957, Hart estimated that 70% of the population of Tangiers was of Rifian origin, and that of these 70% had been established for a long time (Hart, 1957). Despite the great diversity of migratory flows into that city and the development of Rifian emigration to foreign countries, the migrants from the eastern Rif still are an important component of immigration into the region of Tangiers. Between 1975 and 1982, immigrants from the provinces of Nador and Al Hoceima, corresponding more or less to the eastern

Rif, represented more than 15% of the total number of immigrants to Tangiers (C.E.R.E.D., 1986). However, the intensity of Rifian emigration has varied enormously in relation to agricultural conditions, in turn closely tied to climatic fluctuations. Thus, during the drought of 1944-45, between 25,000 and 30,000 Rifian immigrants arrived in Tangiers (Hart, 1957).

Moreover, Rifian emigration to the region of Tangiers is only one indication of the antiquity of Rifian mobility; it also seems clear that the Rifians had other destinations in Morocco, as evidenced by immigration in the massif of Zerhoun.

### EMIGRATION TO ZERHOUN

Located to the north of the city of Meknes, Zerhoun forms a mountainous massif of modest elevation with the highest point at 1,118 m, associated with what are commonly referred to as the "Pre-Rif Wrinkles (ridges)." Settled long ago, the massif shelters the sanctuary of Moulay Idriss, founder of the first Moslem dynasty of Morocco. The economy of this massif was based on a typically Mediterranean traditional agriculture, with a combination of arboriculture (wine grapes, olives, and figs), grain farming, and livestock. The latter occupied the woodlands remaining in the highest areas and on the overly-steep or poorly-exposed northern slopes.

The first Rifian immigrants would likely have arrived between 1822 and 1859, during the reign of Moulay Abderrahmane (Berthier, 1938). Since then, the flow has been continuous. Dresch (1939) estimates the number of Rifians who settled in the Zerhoun during the 1920s at 7,000 out of a total population of approximately 20,000. These immigrants, for the most part, founded new settlements which were exclusive to them, but occasionally they intermingled with other immigrants from Jebala in the low mountains and hills of the western Rif.

The process of integration into the area of the Zerhoun massif is typical. The prospective immigrant comes to ask for work, and then acquires a contract of *Mugharassa*, that is, to undertake the clearing of land for a plantation of fruit trees. This explains why the Rifian douars are found basically where there were lands to clear, in the north, in the center, and in the west. Once installed, the worker brings his family and functions as a bridgehead for new

immigrants. By their hard labor, their tenacity, and their financial management, these newcomers quickly manage to acquire land, sometimes at the expense of their former employers.

#### SEASONAL EMIGRATION TO ALGERIA

The first form of Rifian emigration abroad was seasonal movement to Algeria. If the eastern Rif were the principal region from which Moroccan workers departed for Algeria, it was not unique, since people from the oases of the south (Tafilait and Ouarzazat) and of the Beni Snassen in eastern Morocco also joined the movement.

This emigration appears to have begun at the end of the nineteenth century, at the time of the agricultural colonization of western Algeria. By 1895, Moulieras noted the presence of more than 20,000 workers from the Rif among the colonists of Algeria.

There were said to be 32,000 arrivals in Algeria between May 1931 and April 1932 but this may also include certain tribes of eastern Morocco that do not actually belong to the eastern Rif. In the year 1949, the number of seasonal travelers from the entire Spanish Protectorate who crossed the Moroccan-Algerian border is estimated at 35,000 (Council, 1950). For the province of Quert alone, which corresponds roughly to the eastern Rif, the official Spanish statistics record between 13,000 and 15,000 immigrants per year for the period 1950–1954 (Bossard, 1978).

However, the great significance of this Rifian emigration to Algeria must be viewed in relative terms. Toward 1950, the authorities of the Spanish protectorate estimated that in a normal year 35% of the adult male

population of the Rif emigrated, and that this proportion increased substantially in years of poor harvests.

In the majority of cases the emigration was seasonal (and referred to as “swallow migration”), although certain migrants settled permanently.

However, with the war of liberation of Algeria, and especially with the advent of independence in that country, the flow slackened and was replaced by emigration to Europe.

#### EMIGRATION TO EUROPE

The first massive departures of Rifian workers for Europe occurred around 1960. This corresponds, on the one hand, to the increased demand for labor in Europe, which led several countries to sign labor agreements with Morocco, and, on the other hand, to the policy of using emigration as a safety valve to relieve the economic and social stress in marginal regions, notably in the Rif, after the bloody events of 1958. This movement of manpower became particularly pronounced in the provinces of Al Hoceima and Nador. Between 1969 and 1972, these two provinces registered the highest rates of departure for Europe; the proportions of workers emigrating to Europe, compared to their total population, were 19 and 26 emigrants per 1,000 inhabitants, respectively; this compares to 14–16 per 1,000 inhabitants in the provinces of Taxa, Oujda, and Meknes, and 7–9 per 1,000 in Agadir and Ouarzazat. It has been estimated that somewhat more than 32% of the men 15–59 years old were employed in Europe in 1971; for the whole of Morocco, this percentage was only 5.5% (Bossard, 1978).

### MIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS

If the relative overpopulation that has long characterized the eastern Rif accounts for the long-standing history of emigration, then the persistence of male migration must relate to factors of its intensity and its largely seasonal and temporary nature, and to the effects on population dynamics.

The notion of isolation of this region is untenable; although marginal and marginalized, it has not been completely isolated from the rest of the country. In fact, until the end of the nineteenth century, the flow of Rifian migrants was directed exclusively towards the “Gharb,” a term that designated the more humid northern lands of Morocco to the west of the Atlas range.

Furthermore, it is certain that the acquired habit of emigration was most beneficial during periods of poor harvests, so frequent in this region. By allowing the men to seek temporary employment in other regions, emigration served as a safety valve to release the demographic pressure and avoid economic catastrophe. This made possible the maintenance of relatively high population densities.

The emigrants maintained contacts with their areas of origin, especially during temporary migrations, and this

ensured that these homelands would receive supplementary income in the form of money remitted from abroad. The income brought back from Algeria alone by Rifian workers has been estimated at one billion francs per year at the end of the 1940s. The money transfers from Rifian workers in Europe are even larger; for example, the total money transfers to the provinces of Al Hoceima and Nador reached more than one billion dirhams in 1983, or more than 20% of all transfers from Moroccan workers abroad.

Furthermore, the selective nature of Rifian emigration, which remains essentially masculine, explains why it did not inhibit demographic growth. In fact, all the emigrations previously described have involved far more men than women. Although precise data are lacking, the seventeenth century migrations to Fahs, at least at the beginning, affected only strong, healthy men who could bear arms. For the migrations to Algeria, statistics indicate that the majority of migrants were men; between 1949 and 1953 women represented somewhat less than 8.5% of the Rifians who went to Algeria. The same holds true for the migrations of Rifian workers to Europe; this is, moreover, reflected in the reports of particularly low

proportions of males at the time of the Moroccan censuses of 1960 and 1971, of, respectively, 0.96 and 0.94 for the province of Al Hoceima, and 0.97 and 0.91 for Nador. However, this imbalance has not profoundly affected rates of marriage and, hence, fecundity. The jealousy among men regarding their women was until quite recently one of the major motives for vengeance and Hart (1965) testifies to the attachment of Rifians to the institution of marriage. Marriages seem also to be more stable here than elsewhere (Noin, 1970). Indeed, recent evidence shows that, despite the scale of male migration, marriage rates remained high. In 1982, the proportion of bachelors in the 25–29 year age group in rural environments was 17% in the province of Al Hoceima, and 22.5% in Nador, compared to 9.2% for the whole of rural Morocco. However, in urban environ-

ments these proportions are respectively 44.0 and 43.6%, compared to 52.8% for the whole of urban Morocco. In about 1970, among travelers who had emigrated to Europe from the provinces of Nador and Al Hoceima, 84% were married, and 95% of the families remained at home in the douar (Bossard, 1978).

Under these conditions one can understand how the birthrate remained among the highest in the country. Between 1960 and 1971 the mean annual increase in rural parts of the eastern Rif is estimated at 2.57% per year, against 1.8% for rural Morocco as a whole. Of course, the population increase during the period before the demographic revolution was clearly smaller, but it can be inferred that, for the same reasons, it was relatively higher than in other regions.

### CONCLUSION

Further historical research is necessary in order to better understand the demographic history of the eastern Rif and, of course, the whole of Morocco. However, it appears unlikely that long-standing historical factors and severity of demographic pressure can be entirely due to invasions and infiltration of the population by nomadic invaders, or even to the natural birthrate.

On the contrary, analysis of the numbers and nature of emigration provides a better understanding of how, in an environment as poor as that of the eastern Rif, such relatively high population densities could develop and persist.

Early on, it seems that historical events at the end of

the fifteenth century gave rise to a population increase in the region. These factors include the influx of Andalusian immigrants, the urban flight caused by the Iberian offensive on the Moroccan coast, which in this region led to the seizure of Mellila and, as a consequence, the initiation of a jihad against the occupying peoples.

This initial demographic pressure led to agricultural expansion and intensification, and also opened the floodgates of emigration, most frequently temporary or seasonal, and predominantly male. Due to these characteristics, emigration did not lead to reduced demographic growth but, on the contrary, favored it by opening up access to resources outside the region.

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