

Holy Men, Sharifs and Brotherhoods in 19th Century Morocco: From Spiritual Endeavours to Political and Economic Pragmatism

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During the Spanish-French occupation of Morocco, which began to establish itself in the late 19th century, the Spanish and French authorities showed great interest in the figure of the sharifs and holy men, who formed the traditional cultural and religious elite of the country in the Kabyle regions; that is, in Berber and other more Arabised and urban areas. Both sharifs and holy men enjoyed great power and prestige among the Moroccan population. Thus, by making contact with these figures to secure their cooperation during the processes of occupation, the Protectorate and the colonial era, French and Spanish authorities managed, in many cases, to calm pockets of local resistance that could endanger the peace and internal balance of Moroccan society.

When analysing certain aspects of a country like Morocco, it is important to reflect on religion and its influence in the different spheres of everyday life. Islam has been the basic reference for all Moroccan dynasties, beginning with the Idrisids. However, in its beginnings, this religion originating in the Arabian Peninsula had to adapt to a millenary civilisation that still retained Jewish, Roman and Berber cultural traits.¹ As is known, the spread of Islam in Morocco depended, first and foremost, on

its representatives. Thus, they were forced to adopt a flexible and tolerant version so that the natives would trust the new religion.

In Islam, the Koranic text and the sayings of the Prophet are considered the institutional and legislative foundation. Their interpretation created new Islamic schools that sometimes reached discredited extremes. The ambition to gain power and control over the Muslim world caused ideological and military conflicts between different schools. The historical rivalry

1. There are many examples that confirm the permanence of some Berber or Hebrew pagan traditions that survived in Morocco until a century ago. The annual ceremony of the women's souk held in the province of Errachidia or the tattoos that Berber women wore on their faces are proof of this.

between Shiites and Sunnis could serve as an example in this context. From opposed positions, the two factions aspired to spread their ideas among Muslims in order to achieve broad supremacy.² Gradually, the conflict between the Islamic schools crossed the ideological limits to include questions of an intellectual nature. The conflictive controversy between the philosophers and the Sufists reflects two opposing points of view; one sustains the possibility of applying the existential and rational issues of Greek philosophy to the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet, while the other rejects the previous opinion and believes only in the absolute truth of the Koranic text.³

How did they participate in Moroccan political and social life during the pre-colonial era? How were they seen in rural and urban areas?

In Morocco, the religious schools of the time had a particular impact. The task of propagating and teaching the norms of Islam was performed by two groups: one came from the Arabian Peninsula – the Middle East – and descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima Zahra, and another had no direct lineage but did have a deep understanding of the religion and broad popular support. These were the sharifs and the holy men (*sáada*, plural of *sayyid*), essential cores in the history of Moroccan Islam from medieval to contemporary times. The

great influence of the two groups enables us to ask the following questions: how did they participate in Moroccan political and social life during the pre-colonial era? How were they seen in rural and urban areas? What kind of relations did they maintain with the central power? And, finally, what relations did they have with the Spanish-French authorities who, from 1912, governed the affairs of the Protectorate of Morocco?

Sharifs and Holy Men in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Morocco: From Spiritual Endeavours to Socio-Political Challenges

To answer these questions, it is essential to understand how the figures of the sharif and the holy man were perceived by the collective Moroccan consciousness; that is, how the two elements were regarded within the socio-political context of Morocco in the pre-protectorate and protectorate eras.

In Morocco, the origin of sharifism dates back to medieval times. Idris I, founder of the Idrisid dynasty in 788, managed to be invested emir by the Berbers after his escape from the East.⁴ Idris I was also a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and the genesis of a social and religious phenomenon that would undergo major changes during the Marinid era.

Etymologically, the word sharif means noble. A person is appointed sharif when his

2. The rivalry that existed between the two representative schools of Islam, Shiites and Sunnis, dates back to medieval times but continues to exist today. This rivalry can be considered the motive for the tensions between the Muslims of today's Lebanon, as well as the reason for disagreement between Iran and the rest of the Islamic world. With regard to Morocco, that same rivalry motivated the conflict between the Almoravid dynasty, of Maliki school, and its Almohad successors.

3. As I have pointed out in the text, the conflict between the Islamic factions in medieval times also had repercussions in the intellectual sphere, giving rise to two opposed schools: one that tolerated the use of reason in the interpretation of the holy text and another that prevented all interpretation, given the clarity and perfection of the said text. Averroes, as a philosopher and defender of reason, received harsh criticism from the Sufi al-Ghazali, who went so far as to call him *zindik*; that is, atheist and renegade. See: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *L'incohérence des philosophes, -Tahafut al-falasifa*, Paris, Alboraq, 2020. See also Averroes, *L'Islam et la raison*, Paris, Flammarion, 2000.

4. María Rosa de Madariaga, *Historia de Marruecos*, Madrid, Catarata, 2017, pp. 29-31.

family descends directly from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima Zahra. This and the associated divine blessing – *baraka* – afforded his family respect from the whole of society.⁵ Sharifs performed many functions. Their involvement in all official political acts and preference in the ceremonies of the sultan's court over the highest officials of the Empire is proof of their privilege. The political role of the sharifs depended on their relations with state institutions and shared interests with the central power. With the ideological support of the sharifs, the sultan managed to gain legitimacy and earn the approval of the entire population. Such support was generously rewarded with large financial donations and key political positions.⁶

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The word *sayyid*, although it varied according to the linguistic characteristics of each region – in names such as *assaleh*, good man; *wali Allah*, man of God; *sayyid*, sir, or *chayj*, sheikh –, meant the same thing and he carried out the same function everywhere. All the holy men had become necessary to maintain the balance in a society of such complex composition. The history of the *sayyid* dates back to the Almoravid and Almohad eras and this figure gave rise to the appearance of a phenomenon whose origins do not exist in the Koranic text or in the sayings of the Prophet. The *sayyid* was the result of a correlation between the

true rules of Islam, the interpretations of these rules, the local customs, and the socio-political evolution of Morocco from medieval to contemporary times.

The life of the holy men was characterised by their peculiarity. The holy men lived isolated from the crowd; their basic functions were limited to teaching religion, providing charity, accommodating travellers in their home, and smoothing tensions between men, families and Kabyles. All this enabled them to become an exceptional authority capable, on occasions, of competing with the central power.⁷

From the 15th and 16th centuries, the humble image conveyed by the *sayyid* would undergo major changes. The impotence of the central power in the Iberian expansions then threatening the Moroccan coast allowed the holy men to perform political and social functions. The first step, in this respect, was to promote their religious tendency within society. The Moroccan population responded with empathy to their cause, considering them new leaders in the fight against the “Christian invaders”. Thus, after having successfully carried out their plans to attract the people, from their marabouts (*ribats*) they began to direct the armed resistance against the Spanish-Portuguese invasion, with thousands of combatants who gathered around the figure of the *sayyid*.⁸

Thus, in northern Morocco, the holy men managed to gain the trust and appreciation of society. Indeed, Tamsamani Khalouk notes that, in the Yebala region, the holy men were very popular. Proof of this were the frequent ceremonies and religious festivals held in the

5. Carlos Federico Tessainer Tomasich, *El Raisuni, Aliado y Enemigo de España*, doctoral thesis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1992, p. 75.

6. Abdellah Ben Mlih, *Structures Politiques du Maroc Colonial*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1990, p. 95.

7. Abdellah Laroui, *Marruecos: Islam y nacionalismo*, Madrid, Mapfre, 1994, p. 55.

8. See Abdelaziz Tamsamani Khalouk, “Tachjis al-muytamah al-yabli Bayna al-waqaiih wa-l-tanzir (1895-1907)” [Diagnosis of Yebali Society between the Chronicles and the Theory (1895-1907)], *Dar al-niyaba*, no. 15/16, summer-autumn 1987, p. 31.

different sanctuaries of that region. The same scholar refers to the Raisunis, owners of the Tazraut brotherhood. Their reputation had always been linked to the scholar and architect of Moroccan Sufism Moulay Abdessalam Ben Mehich, whose sanctuary became, once a year, a Mecca for pilgrims from all over the region. There were many factors that explain the privilege and popularity of the Raisunis. One of the chiefs, called Sidi Abdesselam Ben Raisun, summoned the different Kabyles of Yebala to join the Sultanian *harka* and thus defend the country against the Spanish military invasion of 1860. The Alawite sultan Sidi Muhammad Ben Abderrahman officially recognised the courage shown by this holy man from Yebala. Another factor that explains the prestige of the Raisunis is the cultural and religious work carried out by their descendants. The brotherhood became one of the best-known centres of knowledge and Islamic culture, where students from various regions of the country came to receive first-hand training from scholars in different fields of knowledge.

As a result of these events, the holy men would enjoy great popularity and respect as the person/institution that inspired the most confidence among the population. This helped them spread their spiritual programmes and attract more followers throughout the country. The sultan interpreted the popularity of the holy men as a campaign of opposition to state policy; an opinion that was not shared by the people, who saw them as the true defenders of Islam. For Moroccans, the holy men were sanctified beings who could perform wonders. When they died, they became objects of worship – *ziyara* – because of their power to mediate between the Muslim and his God – *Chafa'a*.

In these circumstances the great Moroccan

brotherhoods (*Zawaya-s*) were born: al-Nasiriyya and Wazzaniyya, in the mid-17th century; Darqawiyya and Tiyaniyya, throughout the 19th. These are religious circles with a great deal of influence over the population and the Moroccan state. From the 17th century to the late 19th century, the brotherhoods gained so many followers that there came a time when all Moroccans were devotees of a *zawiya* or brotherhood.⁹ To attract new disciples, the brotherhoods created a vast hagiographic literature in which miraculous deeds of their respective holy men as prodigious teachers were recorded. The members of the brotherhoods added some pre-Islamic and naturalistic worships to these circles so that the brotherhood had a special spiritual character.¹⁰

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From the 19th century, the role of the holy men and the sharifs would undergo important changes. The instigators of some Kabyle rebellions renounced violence only in the case of the peaceful and spiritual intervention of a sharif or a holy man. In 1902, the sultan's representative in Tangier advised the governor of Tétouan to order the sharifs of Bani Yeddir to negotiate peace with the bandits of that Kabyle.¹¹ These conciliatory functions between certain peoples and the sultan were well rewarded. The sharifs and holy men became a theocratic aristocracy with great socio-political influence and important economic interests, and they came to apply their own taxes (*ziyara*), officially recognised by the sultan. Thereafter, the new religious ar-

9. Abdellah Laroui, *Marruecos: Islam y nacionalismo*, op. cit., p. 57.

10. Ibid.

11. "Del representante del sultán Mohamed Torres al gobernador de Tetuán", Rabat Royal Archives, File 763, 1902.

istocracy began to compete with the sovereign, not only politically but also in fiscal matters.¹² Thus, the political, social and economic position of this nucleus could threaten the religious and political powers of the sultan and question his authority. He had to choose between two options: annihilate them or treat them generously. Obviously, the sultan opted for the second option due to the risks involved in the first.¹³ From then on, the central power's treatment of the theocratic circle could not have been better. The sultan appointed them governors of some regions, exempted them from taxes, commissioned them to collect taxes, and granted them large contracts through imperial decrees. Abdejalil Halim comments in his study that the members of the Wazzani brotherhood had great fortunes throughout the northern part of Morocco. The sons of sharif Abd al-Salm al-Wazzani, Mulay Ahmed and Mulay Ali, owned eighteen farms with their orchards and 2,255 workers, 204 rifles, 22 horsemen, 2,650 sheep, 200 cows, 200 mares, and 5,000 hectares of land.¹⁴ In an official letter dated 1885, the sultan's representative in Tangier received a notice to defend and protect the assets of sharif al-Wazzani. In the same letter, reference was made to the need to collaborate with al-Wazzani to collect his taxes (*tartib*) from the Kabyles.¹⁵ Tamsamani Khalouk dealt with the same issue, alluding to the great economic interests of the Raisuni brotherhood, in the Yebala region, and the appearance of a mode of production similar to feudalism. The Raisuni members

of the brotherhoods demanded gifts from all the Yebali Kabyles, and these responded to the demands of the brotherhood by offering large pieces of land and men to work on them. These workers (*al-Hazzabin*) were part of the gift and were obliged to obey the orders of their brotherhood owners. They were rewarded with a small part of the harvest and could not even leave the without consulting the representative of the brotherhood (*al Meqaddim*).¹⁶

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The brotherhoods became closer to the sultan, becoming a spiritual authority ready to collaborate with the government in exchange for it indulging their whims. This new pro-government attitude adopted by the brotherhoods caused great indignation among the Moroccan population. The brotherhoods began to lose their popularity and their discourse became increasingly outdated within Moroccan society, which no longer respected them as before.¹⁷ The people became aware of the danger of submission to these institutions, and many Kabyles rebelled against the tax pressures of the brotherhoods and resisted giving them gifts.

In the early 20th century, relations between the sultan and the brotherhoods would undergo

12. Grigori Lazarev, "Las propiedades inmobiliarias en Marruecos. Contribución al estudio de las propiedades en las aldeas marroquíes", *Dar al-niyaba*, year II, vol. 8, Tangier, autumn 1985, p. 50.

13. Mohamed Bouslham, "Muyaz Machrúh Keráat fi Tataur Alákat Bahd Azauyá Bi Sulta Al Markazía" [A brief project on the reading of the relations between the brotherhoods and the central power], *Tarj Al Magreb*, year II, vol. 2, Rabat, April 1982, p. 90.

14. Abdejalil Halim, "L'iqtaá et l'appropriation de terre au Maroc. Le statut de la terre et des hommes dans le Gharb du XIX siècle", *Albayane*, 22 March-11 April.

15. Muhammad Daoud Archive, Tétouan, Manuscripts and Documentation Sections, File no. 5, TR 5, "Del representante del sultán Mohamed Torres al gobernador de Tetuán".

16. Abdelaziz Tamsamani Khalouk, "Tachjís al-muytamah al-yablí Bayna al-waqaaíh wa-l-tanzir; (1895-1907)", [Diagnosis of Yebali society ...], op. cit., p. 33.

17. Mohamed Bouslham, op. cit., p. 90.

certain changes. When the economic crisis bottomed out and the Moroccan treasury applied new tax reforms, the sultan and his government decided to levy new taxes on the entire population without exceptions. The Moroccan government's new decision caused great indignation among the theocratic aristocracy. The sharifs and the brotherhoods feared losing their tax privileges and demanded that the sovereign immediately suspend the new tax law, warning him of its negative consequences. However, the ultimatum had no effect on the sultan's decisions, as the state was suffering great economic problems and had no alternative. In order to confront the government, the sharifs and the brotherhoods tried to stir up instability in the country using two different methods: the first was to incite popular opposition against the sultan and his entourage; the second contemplated the possibility of approaching foreign powers to request their protection and negotiate the future of Morocco with them. This is the case of the cordial services provided by the Raisuni sharif to Spain and that of the Wazzani family, who offered their lands to France to exploit them for agriculture and mining.¹⁸

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France and Spain had been very receptive to a social category with a marked spiritual authority. Both powers were willing to put pres-

sure on the Makhazen to preserve the rights of the sharifs and the brotherhoods. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the note that a representative of the sultan received from the French ambassador in Morocco, where the latter demanded the continued application of the imperial decree that defended the titles of the sharifs and the *sáada* – holy men.¹⁹ Both institutions were considered by France and Spain as effective elements to control society, as well as to pressure the sovereign and facilitate the establishment of the protectorate of Morocco.²⁰

Sharifs, Sáada and Brotherhoods in the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco

From the Melilla campaigns of 1893 until the 1930s, Spain attempted a series of plans and strategies in Morocco, all of them aimed at shoring up its colonial presence in the region.²¹ The geostrategic context of the new North African military adventure and the circumstances in which it took place made it necessary to consider several factors, notably the socio-cultural aspect.²² The interest in ending the pockets of local resistance, seizing the entire Rif mountain range and protecting Ceuta, Melilla and “the minor strongholds” from alleged Franco-German attacks would lead to structured and meticulous intervention plans in which the exhaustive study of popular Islam and its socio-cultural impact were decisive.²³ In 1911,

18. Grigori Lazarev, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

19. Mohamed Daoud Archive, Tétouan, Manuscripts and Documentation Sections, File no. 5, TR 5.

20. Ricardo Donoso Cortés, *Estudio geográfico político-militar sobre las zonas españolas del norte y sur de Marruecos*, Madrid, Librería Gutenberg, 1913, p. 159.

21. José Manuel Allendesalazar, *La diplomacia española y Marruecos (1907-1909)*, Madrid, ICMA, 1990; see also André Bacoñd, *Los españoles ante las campañas de Marruecos, 1909-1914*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1988; and Víctor Morales Lezcano, *España y el norte de África, el protectorado en Marruecos (1912-1956)*, Madrid, UNED, 1986.

22. Youssef Akmir, “Reflexiones sobre la sociedad pre-colonial marroquí y la política de atracción española, (1898-1912)”, in *Relaciones entre España y Marruecos en el siglo XX*, Cuadernos Monográficos de la Asociación Española de Africanistas Contemporáneos, no. 4, Madrid, Lerko Print, 2000, pp. 23-42.

23. “Las defensas de Ceuta”, *La Época*, 16 December 1898; see also “Ceuta, Canarias, Gibraltar”, *La Época*, 28 November 1898.

the Count of Romanones declared: “Tolerance is not enough; inspiring trust, deep respect and even the protection of religious institutions is also needed. For this reason, in strongholds inhabited by Muslims or where believers often go, the fulfilment of their pious duties should be encouraged by building mosques. Spain must aspire to present itself to Moroccans as a friend to Muslims and as a great homeland that accommodates all beliefs.”²⁴

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An analysis of the subject of popular religion and, very especially, of the phenomenon of the sharifs, the *sáada* and the brotherhoods in the area of the Spanish Protectorate requires, in the first place, an assessment of the state and time of the plans of the Spanish colonial policy in those lands.²⁵ After the disaster of the Battle of Annual in 1921, it was made very clear that the failure of Spain in the Rif was not due to lack of heavy artillery or weapons, but rather other reasons that had little to do with the war. The government and public opinion blamed the failure of the Spanish colonial policy on the deep prevailing ignorance of the customs and beliefs of the native population.²⁶ In order to achieve

the desired objective, the Spanish government painstakingly designed a policy of attraction in the neighbouring empire. It knew that, with the implementation of rigorous plans to attract Moroccan society, Spain would end up forging bonds of sympathy and submission with it, thus preventing possible acts of local resistance.²⁷

“Sharifism”, Sanctity, Moroccan Brotherhoods and Spanish Colonialism

Within the framework of initiatives that Spain intended to introduce in Morocco to consolidate its colonial policy, religious heritage would play a key role. Only with knowledge could Spain penetrate Moroccan Kabyle mentalities and convince them of the “advantages of its civilising enterprises”, thus curbing their tendency to resist. In 1913, coinciding with the beginning of the Protectorate and the occupation of Tétouan, the ethnologist Ricardo Donoso Cortés insisted on the advantage for Spain of winning the trust of Moroccan figures with the greatest religious influence. He said in this regard: “In order to win the will of this people so deranged in their customs, in their feelings and in their faith, it will always be far-sighted and right to win the will of the people *shorfa* – sharifs – and the holy men.”²⁸

Moroccan hagiography also aroused the

24. Tomás García Figueras, *La acción africana de España en torno al 98 (1860-1912)*, vol. 2., IESA-CSIC, 1966, pp. 167-170.

25. I should point out that hagiography in the former area of the Spanish Protectorate has been the subject of numerous studies: see Rachid El Hour and Manuela Marín, *Memoria y presencia de las mujeres santas de Alcazarquivir (Marruecos). Trasmisión oral y tradición escrita*, Salamanca, Universidad de Salamanca, 2018; see also Juan José Sánchez Sandoval, *Sufismo y poder en Marruecos*, Cadiz, Quorum Editores, 2004; Josep Lluís Mateo Dieste, *La hermandad hispano-marroquí, Política y religión bajo el Protectorado español en Marruecos (1912-1956)*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2003.

26. María Rosa de Madariaga, *Abdel-Krim El Jatabi, la lucha por la independencia*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2009; see also Sebastian Balfour, *Abrazo mortal: de la guerra colonial a la guerra civil en España y Marruecos (1909-1939)*, Barcelona, Península, 2002; Víctor Ruiz Albéniz, *España en el Rif (1908-1921)*, Melilla, Ayuntamiento de Melilla, 1994, pp. 20-21; Manuel Leguineche, *Annual 1921. El desastre de España en el Rif*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 1996, pp. 108-110.

27. María Rosa de Madariaga, *En el barranco del lobo: las guerras de Marruecos*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2005, pp. 104-117.

28. Ricardo Donoso Cortés, *Estudio geográfico político-militar sobre las zonas españolas del norte y sur de Marruecos*, Madrid, Librería Gutenberg, 1913, p. 159.

interest of several French scholars, who did not hesitate to go there and conduct important research based on data collected through local written and oral sources. This is the case of Édouard Michaux-Bellaire, whose studies reflect his exhaustive and profound knowledge of Moroccan tribal traditions. Michaux-Bellaire lived for a long time in the Yebala peninsula, between the regions of Tangier, El Habt and Lucus, to which he would dedicate numerous studies published in monographs and magazines. Here, it is worth highlighting those published in the journal *Archives marocaines*. These articles would later become basic references for anyone specialising in Moroccan Islam.²⁹

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In this context, it is worth noting that the role of the holy men and the sharifs was key; without them, the Kabyles would never have been able to preserve internal balance and social peace. Thanks to the mediating work that they carried out, they managed to put an end to tribal conflicts and on occasions bring about the surrender of some rebellious Kabyles through the pacts that they signed with their leaders.³⁰ The tendency to collaborate with the Spanish colonial administration's plans was a common characteristic among the most representative

figures of Moroccan sharifism, and people such as Raisuni, Wazzani or Tiyani Manubi are paradigmatic in this regard.³¹ The same can be said of the rewards that the descendants of the sharifs and holy men received in exchange for their good conduct before the Spanish administration of the Protectorate.³²

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it can be deduced from this study that interest in the subject of holy men, sanctuaries and brotherhoods responds to the need to understand the mentality of the Moroccan people. This involves analysing the different contexts in which popular Islam evolves and specifying the ideological and cultural impact that this religious phenomenon provokes. Studying Sufism and sanctity in the Protectorate area allowed the Spanish-French ethnology of the pre-protectorate and protectorate eras to exclusively bring little-known aspects of deepest Morocco to their respective governments and public opinion. Making sharifs aware of their holy background, and the *sáada* of their prodigious deeds, their healing powers, their divine blessings and their social roles within the city and the Moroccan Kabyle was, in short, a very useful task that facilitated the interventionist work carried out by the Spanish and French colonial administrations in their respective areas of the Protectorate.

29. See Édouard Michaux-Bellaire, "L'Islam et le Maroc", *Archives marocaines*, vol. 27, 1927, pp. 115-145, <http://am.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/Pdf/AM-1927-V27-04.pdf> [last accessed: 9 September 2020]; "Les confréries religieuses au Maroc", *Archives marocaines*, vol. 27, 1927, pp. 1-87, <http://am.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/n/Pages/AM-1927-V27-02.aspx> [Last accessed: 9 September 2020].

30. Francisco Gómez de Jordana was the architect of the policy of pensions and compensations to Moroccans in exchange for their services of collaboration with Spain. Gómez de Jordana advocated a peaceful colonial action and an occupation without so much shedding of Spanish blood. See Youssef Akmir, *De Algeciras a Tetuán (1875-1906). Orígenes del proyecto colonialista español en Marruecos*, Rabat, IEHL, 2009, p. 76.

31. On Ahmed Raisuni's collaboration with Spain, see Carlos Federico Tomasich Tessainer, *Raisuni, aliado y enemigo de España*, Malaga, Editorial Algazara, 1998.

32. Youssef Akmir, "Capitales españoles en Marruecos en torno a 1912: ambición colonial, clientelismo político y pactos confidenciales", Rabat, Instituto de Estudios Hispano-Lusos, 2013, pp. 63-67.

Close contact with the figure of the holy men or sayyid and of the sharif made it possible to attract a religious elite of greater social standing and to have their mediation services, since

both were effective instruments for putting an end to any local resistance movement, and facilitating the occupation of the territory without any greater economic and moral cost.