

THE IMAM OF AIT KASSEM SERVES LUNCH

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho

Early one April morning in 2007, we drove down from the Todra Gorge in Southeast Morocco and entered the Valley of Roses, where rose water is prepared for export. Our tour group had been invited to lunch with Ahmed Maghiouzi, the Imam of Ait Kassem, the Muslim minister of the local mosque.

The assembly hall was beautifully constructed and was decorated with Berber symbols. Although our guide and the imam were Berbers, the indigenous peoples of North Africa, they conversed in Arabic, the national tongue as well as the language of Islam.

We were impressed by the fact that the imam himself was the servant, an expression of the racial and social equality that is a basic Islamic principle. The Imam served tajine, a delicious stew of meat, couscous, potatoes, carrots, and parsnips steamed in a conical ceramic cooking pot.

After lunch the imam's small son Lahcen came in and confidently shook hands with the entire group, and he then sat down next to his father. We were then encouraged to ask the imam any question that we wanted.

The first question was about the imam's theological training. He answered that he had spent 14 years at a seminary where he memorized the Qu'ran, studied the Sunnah (the deeds and sayings of Mohammed), Islamic law, and astronomy.

The group was curious about why the imam had to study astronomy. Medieval Muslims were expert astronomers and many of the stars have Arabic names. The imam explained that some Muslim prayers require stellar orientation, and that the determination of Muslim holy days requires exact knowledge of the appearance of the new moon.

I asked the imam about the Wahabi theology that inspired Osama bin Laden, and which is still being spread and funded by Saudi Arabia. Our guide had earlier pointed

out some women in black purdah and had explained that their husbands had been influenced by this very conservative Islamic sect.

When the imam informed us that that Ministry of Islamic Affairs had proscribed Wahabi teachings, I followed up with an observation that this appeared to be a violation of religious freedom. Our guide defended this saying that the threat of Al Qaeda was so great that this decision was a matter of national security.

In May of 2003, three Saudis were given ten-year sentences for starting an Al Qaeda cell in Morocco and planning to blow up ships in the Straits of Gibraltar. Later that same month, ten suicide bombers killed 41 people and injured another 100 in Casablanca, the second largest city in Africa.

In March of this year, police cornered an Al Qaeda operative in an internet café in Casablanca where he blew himself up. While we were in the country, police had located more four more terrorists, three of whom blew themselves up and the fourth was shot by police. Because of police effectiveness, we felt fairly secure, and I at least was convinced that terrorism should be handled by good police work rather than a foolish military adventures in the Middle East.

America had air bases in Morocco until 1963 and was a strong ally during the Cold War. Along with other moderate Muslim countries, including Saddam's Iraq, Osama bin Laden has called Morocco an "apostate" nation and it has therefore been a target for jihadis.

Earlier in the trip we visited a madrassa in the medieval city of Fes. There were 26 students living in a beautifully ornate 14th Century building. We interviewed three students who were studying theology with 300 other seminarians at Fes University, which has an unbroken history of 1100 years. For centuries the students in Fes would gather around the professor's "chair" and form an "intellectual circle."

The students condemned terrorists who claim to be Muslims. They said that Islam teaches that it is absolutely prohibited to take a life without reason, and that those who commit suicide go straight to Hell. The students also confirmed that Wahabi theology was not part of their curriculum, and they also mentioned that classes in

Judaism and Christianity would soon be added to their syllabus. When asked about when and whom they would marry, they surprised us by saying that there would be no obstacle to them marrying Jewish or Christian women.

Returning to the assembly hall, the imam's wife came in, shook hands with everyone, and then assisted in a demonstration of a Berber wedding. The couple who had been married the longest was chosen from our group to dress up and play the parts of bride and groom. Bill and Doris from New Jersey, married fifty years, were beaming in their elaborate costumes as the imam wrote out a wedding contract in the elaborate Arabic script.

I have read many books and articles on the world's religions, but there is nothing like person to person contact to correct and deepen our understanding and increase our tolerance for other beliefs.