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# Shepherds in Morocco: the invisible people of sheep and goat systems

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**Abstract.** In Morocco, the 2013-2017 average of sheep population is 19,290,628 heads and that of goats is 5,817,801. The number of sheep farms is 781,563 and the number of goat farms stands at 301,897. The people responsible for tending these animals are overlooked. Available scientific literature on shepherds is scanty. This paper aims at analyzing the current situation of shepherds and prospects of the shepherding profession. It is based on exploitation of census data and semi-structured interviews with at least five shepherds in each of the following provinces: Agadir Ida-Ou-Tanan, Azilal, Berrechid, Chichaoua, El Kelâa des Sraghna, Essaouira, Khouribga, Rhamna, Safi, Settat, Taroudant, Tata and Youssoufia. According to the 1971 population census, the total number of shepherds was 283,900, over half of which are aged less than 15 years of age. The population of shepherds decreased by 82% between 1971 and the 2014 censuses. The less than 15 years category has disappeared in the 2004 and 2014 censuses. The female contribution to shepherding stands at 17% in the 1971 and 2014 censuses while it reached 25% in the 2004 census. Shepherds form heterogeneous groups in terms of social status, working conditions, remuneration forms and salary levels. The rural young people do not reject to work as shepherds unreasonably, they refuse the conditions associated with the activity. When shepherding is conducted within the family farm it goes unpaid and when it is assumed for others, it results in low pay, long hours, unbearable working conditions and unequal social relations. The shepherding activity needs social and legal recognition, upgrading through professionalization and enhanced attractiveness of the work.

**Keywords.** Morocco – Shepherd – Sheep – Goats.

## **Bergers au Maroc : les gens invisibles des systèmes d'élevage ovin et caprin**

**Résumé.** Au Maroc, la population moyenne d'ovins durant la période 2013-2017 est de 19 290 628 têtes et celle de caprins est de 5 817 801 têtes. Le nombre d'exploitations ayant des ovins s'élève à 781 563 tandis que le nombre d'exploitations avec caprins est estimé à 301 897. Les personnes chargées de ces animaux sont négligées. La littérature scientifique disponible sur les bergers est maigre. Le présent article vise à analyser la situation actuelle des bergers et les perspectives de la profession. Il s'appuie sur l'exploitation des données des recensements et des entretiens semi-structurés avec au moins cinq bergers dans chacune des provinces suivantes Agadir Ida-Ou-Tanan, Azilal, Berrechid, Chichaoua, El Kelâa des Sraghna, Essaouira, Khouribga, Rhamna, Safi, Settat, Taroudant, Tata et Youssoufia. Le recensement de la population de 1971 indiquait un total de 283 900 bergers, dont plus de la moitié avaient moins de 15 ans. La population des bergers a diminué de 82% entre 1971 et 2014. La catégorie des moins de 15 ans a disparu des recensements de 2004 et 2014. La proportion des bergers de sexe féminin s'élève à 17% dans les recensements de 1971 et 2014 et à 25% dans celui de 2004. Les bergers forment des groupes hétérogènes en termes de statut social, de conditions de travail, de formes de rémunération et de niveaux de salaire. Les jeunes ruraux ne refusent pas de travailler comme bergers de manière déraisonnable, ils refusent les conditions associées à l'activité. Lorsque le gardiennage est effectué au sein de la ferme familiale, il est souvent non rémunéré et, lorsque le gardiennage est fait au profit des tiers, la rémunération est faible, durée et conditions difficiles de travail, et des relations sociales inégales. Le métier de berger nécessite une reconnaissance sociale et juridique à travers la professionnalisation et au renforcement de l'attractivité du travail.

**Mots-clés.** Maroc – Berger – Ovin – Caprin.

## I – Introduction

Sheep and goats are an important component of the livestock sector in Morocco. They play an important economic and social role. Their estimated contribution to the country's GDP varies from 1.5% to 2% (Boujenane, 2005). The 2013-2017 average of sheep population is 19,290,628 heads and that of goats is 5,817,801. The number of sheep farms is 781,563 with an average of 21 sheep and the number of goat farms is 301,897 with an average of 19 goats. Unless kept on-farm or near the house such as the case of some sheep and goat breeds raised indoors, sheep and goats need permanent tending. Even a few ewes or goats will require tending and caring. It is very common in Morocco to observe adult people (men or women) or children (boys and girls) along roadsides with few sheep particularly during the spring season or stubble fields during the summer. Shepherding contracts, family and salaried labor employment cover complex situations and statuses. There are relatively comprehensive works and articles on sheep and goat production systems in Morocco. However, available scientific literature on shepherds is rather scanty and sporadic. Few documents are dedicated to shepherds or contain significant parts on this group. The high territorial diversity of Morocco displays itself in the existence of culturally, linguistically, socio-economically, and spatially differentiated regions. Within such diversity, the study of the situation of shepherds requires an integrative approach. This work is based on the exploitation of available population censuses data and semi-structured interviews with at least five shepherds in each of the following provinces: Agadir Ida-Ou-Tanan, Azilal, Berrechid, Chichaoua, El Kelâa des Sraghna, Essaouira, Khouribga, Rhamna, Safi, Settat, Taroudant, Tata and Youssoufia. Key issues discussed concerned shepherding arrangements, work conditions and shepherds' views about shepherding.

## II – Background

The results of the 1996 General Agricultural Census revealed that Morocco counted 781,563 farms rearing sheep representing 52% of total farms and 71% of all livestock farms. Landless farmers and those with less than one hectare raised more than 16% of the total sheep. Farms between 1 and less than 10 hectares reared 48% of sheep. Farms between 10 and less than 50 hectares raised about 30% of total sheep flock (MADRPM-RGA-1998). Farms with 50 hectares and more hectares kept 6.67% of total sheep population. Goat farms counted 301,897, representing 20% of total number of farms and 27% of livestock farms in the country (MADRPM, 1998). Chentouf (2018) reported that 83% of the national goat flock is reared in small farms of less than five hectares with 46% and 16% located in mountains and Saharan areas, respectively. The heavy reliance on family labor is typical of sheep and goat farms, with more than 80% of the farms use permanent family labor while only 5% of farms engage some permanent salaried labor. The total number of family members working on-farm reaches almost 2 million people (1,955,845) with the ratio of 1.61 per farm. Salaried labor involves 136,593 workers with a ratio of 1.7 per farm.

## III – Shepherds in Morocco

In Morocco, the terms '*sareh*', '*amaksa*' and '*raï*' indicate the shepherd in Arabic dialect, Amazigh speaking communities and classical Arabic respectively. The word '*sarha*' refers to the action of shepherding. The main categories of shepherds in sheep systems include a) the herder-shepherd, b) the family-shepherd other than the herder, c) the associate-shepherd and d) the salaried shepherd. All these types hardly occur in a pure state and vary across regions. The 1971 population census indicated that over half of Morocco's shepherds were children less than 15 years of age with girls contributing 21% to this age group. The second most important age group consisted of shepherds between 15 and 44 years, representing 43.6 of the total population of shepherds with the contribution of the female shepherds standing at 12% (Pascon & Ennaji 1986). Between the 1971

and the 2014 censuses, the population of shepherds decreased by 82%. The most significant decline occurred between the 2004 and the 2014 censuses reaching 66% against a decline of 48% between the 1971 and 2004 censuses. The female contribution to shepherding amounted to 17% in the 1971 and 2014 censuses while it reached 25% in the 2004 census (Table 1).

**Table 1. Shepherds by sex according to the 2004 and 2014 population census**

Census year	Male	Female	Total
1971	236,000	47,900	283,900
2004	111,375	36,397	147,772
2014	41,454	8,774	50,228

Source : HCP – Results of the general censuses of population and habitat (RGPH).

One significant result of both 2004 and 2014 censuses was the complete disappearance of the less than 15 years category. In the 2014 census, the 15-29 age group represented 58%, followed by the 30-49 age group representing 28.6%. This means that young people engage in shepherding.

**Table 2. Shepherds by age groups according to the 2004 and 2014 population censuses**

Age group	2004 (N)	2004 (%)	2014 (N)	2014 (%)
15-29	107,183	72.5	29,225	58.2
30-49	26,487	17.9	14,362	28.6
More than 50	14,102	9.6	6,641	13.2

Source : HCP – RGPH 2004, 2014.

Herders, particularly those living in cities, continue to contract associate shepherds among their relatives and their douars of origins. Shepherds searching for animal daily care only, often resort to the '*mouqef*'. The shepherd in the *mouqef* is recognizable by the stick '*âsa*', the hat '*taraza*', a typical backpack '*mozi*' and the type of cloths he wears. Some known '*mouqefs*' include Inezgane in the Souss region and Ain Lehnouch in the Middle Atlas. Brokers ('*smasria*') in rural souks are well informed on those looking for shepherds, those searching for work and prevailing salary levels. Rhamna and Sraghna continue to have the reputation of suppliers of experienced sheep shepherds. Imintanout, Khénifra and Essaouira are also suppliers of young shepherds. All shepherds are from rural areas with a pastoral background.

Shepherds are responsible for the well-being of all individual animals in the herd, their grazing, watering, walking and movement, relations within the herd, and behavioral conduct. Shepherds organize and supervise the movements of the herd by throwing stones, by throwing the stick, by shouting, by using sounds and phrases animals of the herd are accustomed to. Shepherds know animals' preferred and rejected plants, growth stages of grazed plants and grazed parts in conjunction of forages availability and season.

Levels of salary vary according to the nature of the work. Shepherds who tend the herd from morning to evening receive monthly salaries between 500 and 800 dirhams. Full time, experienced, professional shepherds whose responsibility for the herd is total, be it on-farm or the *âzib* are paid between 1000 and 2100 dirhams/month. A herder – employer in Essaouira (March 2019) declared that his herd is tended by two shepherds one receiving 1200 and the other 1000 dirhams. The cases with 1500 dirhams monthly are many. For this group, shepherds are always housed on-farm or the herder's '*âzib*'; they receive all their food needs, clothes and one animal for *Aid Al Adha*.

## IV – Working conditions and social image

In Morocco, working conditions of shepherds vary whether shepherding is conducted in the plains or in mountains, the size and the structure of the herd and the seasonal changes. The extent of the grazing area offered to the herd compels the shepherd to walk long distances on a daily basis. Even when the grazing area is a small fallow field, shepherding necessitates non-stop watching and walking to prevent the animals from trespassing to neighboring cultivated fields. One shepherd from Sidi Bou Othman (Rhamna province) declared walking 12 km daily. Shepherds may have to spend most of their working hours without other people around. While shepherds learn to live with the least comfort and to support the harshness of winter cold and summer heat, their living conditions remain hard particularly during the transhumance and in 'âzib' stays. Nowadays, the use of the mobile is helping shepherds to stay connected with the rest of the world.

Some shepherds evoked the fact that many prophets, including the prophet Mohammed practiced shepherding. The latter teaches patience, humility, and inner strengths. Shepherds who care for sheep and goats for a proportion of the offspring are positively perceived in Morocco's rural areas. Associate shepherds are known for their trustworthiness, hard work and experience with livestock herding (Pascon and Ennaji, 1986). Looking at the situation of shepherds in Morocco in the light of experiences of countries in the northern side of the Mediterranean revealed substantial shortages with implications for the role and status of shepherds. In Morocco, shepherds as a social category and shepherding as a profession are hardly on the development agenda and public debate. None of the 50 schools providing agriculture and livestock related training offer courses destined to shepherds compared with shepherds' schools in France and Spain. The research and policy efforts for the valorization of Morocco's pastoralism is rather negligible in comparison with the European Union policy.

## V – Conclusions

The rural young people do not reject shepherding unreasonably, but they refuse the conditions often associated with the activity. While the family shepherd is denied the respect of the income earner, the salaried shepherd is poorly remunerated. Decision makers need to be innovative in the design and the implementation of policies targeted to shepherds as a specific working category with concrete supportive measures in favor of their qualification, working environment and conditions.

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