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The Politics of Birth in Morocco: A History
Between Muslim Midwifery, French Colonial Obstetrics, and the Postcolonial Arab Spring

What is at political stake in birth? Control over birth is control over population, but birth is also the moment a person is constituted, when he becomes a political, legal, and social being. No wonder then that the efforts by the republic of France to govern and colonize the sultanate of Morocco should ultimately become a battle over Muslim birth itself. The social history of PMI (Protection Maternel et Infantile) in Morocco shows how medicine negotiates the line between the biological and the social; Muslim midwives mediated between Galenic, Islamic, and biomedical knowledge, a medical authority French male obstetricians sought to usurp. Yet women’s therapeutic networks survive the rise and fall of colonial medical systems. And a clinical epidemiology of birth allowed the reproductive Muslim body to speak—food for thought as the polities of North Africa and Egypt are publicly renegotiated through bodies in the Arab Spring.

Ellen Amster is the Jason A. Hannah Chair in the History of Medicine at McMaster University and an associate professor in the Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics and the Department of History. A U.S. Fulbright-Hayes scholar and a Chateaubriand scholar of the Government of France (1998), she received her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania (2003). Her research includes Islamic and French histories of science, global public health, maternal and infant health, and the transnational history of medicine. She has been a simultaneous Arabic-French-English translator for an ORBIS ocular surgery mission, a researcher at the Institut National d’Hygiène du Maroc, and created a global health field study program in Morocco. Her book is the first history of medicine and public health in Morocco, Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the Colonial Encounter in Morocco, 1877-1956 (Univ. of Texas Press).