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Carnival Under Surveillance: Sultan Tolba and The Politics of French Colonial Governance

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Abstract

This article examines Sultan Tolba, the spring festival organised annually by the madrasa students (tolba) of Fez, focusing on its historical origins, ritual stages, and political meanings. Based on a historical approach combining archival research with analysis of colonial and Moroccan sources, it argues that under the French Protectorate (1912–1956) the ritual was not simply tolerated but actively appropriated and managed by colonial authorities. Protectorate officials inserted themselves into the festival's ceremonial economy through monetary gifts (mouna/hadiya), official visits, translated speeches, photographic staging, and the careful reproduction of makhzenian protocol in colonial performance. Drawing on colonial reports (including the Bulletin Officiel), eyewitness testimony such as that of Louis de Barthou, and interpretations of ritual discourse by scholars such as Jocelyne Dakhlia, the article demonstrates how colonial governance sought to domesticate the festival's inherent ambivalence by transforming licensed inversion into a supervised spectacle—at once an instrument of pacification and a site where anxieties about student mobilisation remained visible. Sultan Tolba thus reveals how colonial power governed through ritual continuity, converting parody into political pedagogy and symbolic inversion into a reaffirmation of sovereign order. At the same time, drawing on postcolonial theory—particularly Homi Bhabha's concept of ambivalence and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque—the article shows how the tolba, while appearing to reproduce the ritualised spectacle of colonial authority, subtly destabilised its symbolic structures from within.

1. Introduction

Sultan Tolba was a festival organized by the tolba of the madrasas of Fez. It combined celebration, parody, and symbolic inversion of authority. Held annually at the beginning of spring, in March or April, the festival temporarily installed a talib of one of the madrasas as sultan. He presides over a mock court, complete with ministers, guards, processions, music, and public performances. These festivities, collectively known as the *nuzha al-tolba*, turned urban space into a theatrical arena in which scholarly youth staged sovereignty through humour, spectacle, and symbolic power.

At the urban level, Sultan Tolba functioned as a festival of Fez itself, embedded in the city's social rhythms and public spaces. It unfolded within a carnivalesque setting marked by music, dance, meals, tea, and collective excursions beyond the city walls, integrating religious ritual with popular festivity. In doing so, it blurred the boundaries between spiritual culture and urban sociability, as well as between sacred instruction and worldly pleasure.

2. Origin Sultan Tolba's Festival

The Sultan Tolba was a ritual festival that originated in Fez in the mid-seventeenth century, during the reign of Moulay Rachid, founder of the Alawite dynasty, and persisted—through transformations and reconfigurations—until the 1960s, when it was brought to an end under Hassan II. Spanning nearly three centuries, the festival constituted one of the most enduring and complex student rituals in Moroccan history, combining scholarly life, political symbolism, carnival inversion, and popular festivity. Far from being a marginal folkloric survival, the Sultan Tolba occupied a central place in the cultural and political imagination of Fez, functioning as a ritualised enactment of temporary sovereignty that articulated relations between students, urban society, and the Makhzen.

The origins of the Sultan Tolba are inseparable from the foundational narratives of the Alawite dynasty. Both Moroccan and European sources link the emergence of the festival to the rise of Moulay Rachid and, more specifically, to the killing of the Jewish notable Ben Mechaal of Taza in the 1660s. According to a legend recounted by Henri Gaillard, the episode took place in a context of political disorder at the end of the Saadian period. Ben Mechaal, ruling through terror, imposed humiliating tributes on Fez, including the annual demand for a young woman. In this account, Moulay Rachid, then a student in Fez, disguises himself as the chosen girl and infiltrates Taza hidden inside a chest, accompanied by forty tolba concealed in similar chests. Once inside the palace, the students emerge and kill the tyrant, whereupon Rachid is proclaimed sultan. The tolba's decisive role as scholar-warriors is subsequently commemorated through the annual festival.

According to a legend recounted by Henri Gaillard in *Une ville de l'Islam: Fès*, the festival of Sultan Tolba has its origins in the turbulent final years of the Saadian dynasty. Amid widespread disorder and political anarchy, a Jew named Ben Mechaal seized power and ruled from his capital, Taza, through terror. Each year, he demanded from the people of Fez a *hadiya*, a customary tribute, consisting of the most beautiful young woman in the city for his harem. At that time, Rachid was a student (*taleb*) in Fez. When the charifa, mother of the girl designated for the tribute, implored his assistance in saving her daughter, Rachid resolved to avenge the humiliation inflicted upon his community. Still beardless, he donned a *haik* and disguised himself as the young woman. He was conveyed to Taza in great ceremonial pomp, accompanied by forty richly adorned chests presented as a dowry. Following the tribute ceremony, Ben Mechaal ordered the procession into his palace. At that moment, the forty chests, functioning symbolically as a Trojan Horse, were opened, and forty tolba emerged. Together, they killed the tyrant. Moulay Rachid was immediately proclaimed sultan by his companions and acclaimed by a populace celebrating its deliverance (Gaillard, 1905, pp. 169-170).

He then returned triumphantly to Fez, escorted by his loyal tolba, whose role as scholar-warriors came to be commemorated annually in the festival of the Sultan Tolba. The legend concludes with Moulay Rachid's marriage to the young woman he had saved. (Charmes, 1887, pp. 313-314. See Cenival, 1925, pp. 187-218).

Alongside these legendary accounts, Moroccan historiography offers more sober narratives of the same episode. The Moroccan chronicler al-Ufrani, a near-contemporary of Moulay Rachid, records a related account in *Nuzhat al-Hadi*. He recounts that

> *Moulay Rachid, fearing his brother Moulay Mohamed, fled and wandered across the country, aspiring to seize kingship, until the end of his wanderings brought him to the kasba of Ben Mechaal. There, he found a Jew from among ahl al-dhimma, who possessed immense wealth and precious treasures, oppressed the Muslims and mocked Islam and its believers. Moulay Rashid then devised a plan to eliminate him, until God granted him success in a matter whose full account would take a long time to narrate. He killed him, seized his wealth and treasures, and distributed them among those who followed him and joined his cause. Through this, his power was reinforced, his supporters multiplied, and his reputation spread widely among travellers.*

Al-Ufrani further notes that when Moulay Mohamed learned of his brother's growing strength and success, he set out to confront him but was killed in the ensuing encounter. With his rival eliminated, Moulay Rachid emerged as the sole sovereign (Ufrani, 1998, pp. 425-426). A near-contemporary Moroccan historian of Moulay Rachid, al-Ufrani, records a related account. He recounts in *Nozhet el-Hadi* that

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The first Moroccan historian to explicitly connect the killing of Ben Mechaal to the institutionalisation of the *nuzhat al-tolba* is Abd al-Rahman ibn Zaydan. In his account, the consolidation of Moulay Rachid's authority is directly linked to the formalisation of the student procession. As Ibn Zaydan writes:

> *It was he who instituted the nuzhat al-tolba, a practice that continues to be observed every year to this day in Fez and Marrakech during the spring season. It began after he killed Ben Machaal and took possession of his treasures, from which he organised a splendid nuzha for the students in his retinue, who numbered around five hundred. From that day onward, it was adopted as an annual custom during his lifetime and after his death. (Ibn Zaydan, 1937, p. 23)*

These narratives, whether legendary or historiographical, converge on a crucial point: the Sultan Tolba emerges at the intersection of political power, scholarly authority, and collective action. Moulay Rachid's well-documented patronage of learning, his close association with scholars, and his active support of madrasas in Fez and Marrakech provided fertile ground for the elevation of students into a ritualised form of authority. The festival thus crystallised a symbolic alliance between sovereignty and knowledge, granting students a sanctioned space in which to perform power while simultaneously reaffirming the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.

3. Ritual Stages of Sultan Tolba

Over the centuries, the Sultan Tolba had developed into a highly structured institution. Each spring, following royal authorisation, the students of Fez's madrasas elected an ephemeral sultan through a public auction. Traditionally, the Sultan of the *tolbas* was always "chosen from among the most learned and the most spiritually accomplished," (*Alger-étudiant*, 31 May 1924) and participation was restricted to non-Fassi students of the madrasas. According to Idriss al-Kattani, this form of sultanate was effectively reserved for impoverished students from outside the city. "This privilege was therefore intended to encourage young men from rural areas and distant towns to attend institutions of learning such as al-Qarawiyyin in Fez and Ibn Yusuf in Marrakech, and to motivate them by instilling in their hearts feelings of satisfaction, enthusiasm, and joy for learning." (Al-Kattani, 1939, p.1147)

Once officially proclaimed, the Sultan of the Tolba immediately set about constituting a miniature court and government. After the election, the reigning sultan—"His Sharifian Majesty"—formally acknowledged the mock sultan by sending the insignia of sovereignty. This investiture functioned as

both authorisation and containment: it licensed inversion while setting its limits. The insignia reproduced the visual language of Moroccan royal authority and included an escort of soldiers, the *mchaouri*, spear-bearers, fly-whisk bearers, a parasol (*mdall*), a saddled horse, and a complete ceremonial costume. The costume's components—caftan, silk *hayk*, *farajiya*, turban, trousers, cloth for a *razza*, a red pointed skullcap associated with the Makhzen, and a white *burnous*—constituted a portable iconography of sovereignty. In this stage, the student body becomes legible as a "state": power is enacted through objects, display, and protocol before it is enacted through speech or action. (Doutté, 1909, p. 198).

Figure 1: Sultan Tolba at the beginning of the twentieth century, from *Le Maroc pittoresque, Fès* by Alfred Bel and Larribe, 1917

The newly invested Sultan Tolba then undertook the practical task that underpinned the entire ritual cycle: from among his fellow madrasa students, he appointed a chamberlain (often termed the *mchaouri* or *qaʿid al-machouar*), *oumana* (trustees), ministers, and other dignitaries who would accompany him in public, raising funds and provisions for the *nuzha/nzaha*—the multi-day festive excursion involving the entire body of students. The Sultan of the Tolba formally solicited contributions from viziers, senior caids, and other officials through sealed letters bearing his signet. These letters deliberately imitated sharifian correspondence and deployed the full ceremonial style of royal missives—invocations, chains of honorifics, and commanding formulas—yet they hollowed out that solemn form through burlesque exaggeration and absurd demands. Contributions were requested in cash or kind (sheep, sugar, butter, bread, couscous), but the rhetoric frequently escalated into comic threats: if the recipient refused, the mock sultan would unleash armies not of men but of fleas and bedbugs; if beasts of burden were lacking, woodlice would be sent to transport the money.

On Friday, the mock sultan left his madrasa to perform congregational prayer at the Andalus Mosque, where prayer was said in his name. He then visited the shrine of Sidi Ali ben Harazem, the patron saint of the tolba. Significantly, the festival's movement toward profane festivity begins with a movement toward sacred space. The ritual thus links mock sovereignty to religious legitimacy, grounding the coming inversion in a sacred itinerary. On the following day, Saturday, after the *duhr* prayer, the Sultan

of the Tolba exited Fez—often through Bab al-Mahrouq—passing between Fez al-Jdid and the kasbah of the Cherarda, then Bab Ftouh before proceeding toward the banks of the Oued al Jawahir. Dar al-Makhzen supplied tents for the encampment, and notables and neighbouring tribal figures pitched their own tents nearby. The departure marks a key ritual threshold: the festival relocates from the urban sphere of surveillance and Makhzen order to a rural landscape that permits the expansion of play, spectacle, and collective leisure.

Figure 2: The procession of Sultan Tolba, from *Le Maroc pittoresque, Fès* by Alfred Bel and Larribe, 1917

The procession is staged with the full pomp of a royal outing. Armed Jbala fire flintlock rifles, their detonations scattering pigeons from the ancient walls; the *mehaouri* acts as *qaʿid al-machouar*; lance-bearers and fly-whisk bearers perform courtly gestures; soldiers protect the mock ruler; and musicians accompany the movement. The exit gate becomes a theatrical device: it frames the transformation of a student into a sovereign double and marks the passage into a space where hierarchy can be inverted more boldly.

For seven days, the encampment hosted abundant food, music, games, and mock-sultanic displays. The *nuzha* was not merely a student event; it drew families, visitors, merchants, and notables, turning the rural outskirts into a shared space of leisure and collective participation. The Sultan Tolba's tent became the ceremonial centre of a temporary court, while the broader camp operated as a popular festival. Travel accounts describe the spectacle of grouped tents, banners, horsemen in gala dress, and "a prodigious tumult of voices," suggesting both scale and sensory intensity. The entire city, as observers noted, was drawn into the camp's orbit, visiting with gifts and participating in the regulated joy of the occasion.

Figure 3: The encampment of Sultan Tolba, from *Le Maroc pittoresque, Fès* by Alfred Bel and Larribe, 1917

A decisive stage occurs when the real monarch sends the customary *hadiya*—often conveyed by sons, brothers, or a khalifa—consisting of cash and provisions (mithqals, sheep, sugar loaves, butter, tea, candles, bread, semolina). Historical examples show the considerable scale of these gifts and the participation of high officials. Yet the ritual does not end with a grateful reception. The royal gift becomes an object of scrutiny and burlesque contestation: the Sultan Tolba inspects it, deems it insufficient, and dispatches a messenger to request additional provisions. In some accounts, he theatrically expresses displeasure, summons the sultan's barber to shave him to musical accompaniment, and then demands the *mdall* (parasol). Here, the parasol crystallises the logic of the festival: it is both imitation and insignia, marking a temporary transfer of sovereign signs that remains dependent on royal sanction.

The climax of the festivities is the encounter between the reigning sultan and Sultan Tolba. In this carefully choreographed scene, the mock sovereign receives the monarch with theatrical arrogance, claims fantastical armies (of vermin), and treats the king as an inferior—only for the exchange to resolve into submission, petitioning, and restored hierarchy. The encounter condenses the festival's political logic: inversion is permitted, even expected, but only within a frame that ultimately reaffirms the real sultan's authority. The parody is thus not revolutionary but ritualised containment—an authorised suspension of hierarchy that ends by re-establishing it.

At the close of the *khutba*, the Sultan of the Tolba formally presents his request, which the reigning sultan customarily fulfils. This moment crystallises the practical dimension of the ritual, for the Sultan of the Tolba was entitled to a range of concrete privileges, either for himself or for members of his family. These included, most notably, the release of an imprisoned relative or a lifelong exemption from taxation.

On the twenty-first day, a *talib* formally informs the makhzen that the *nzaha* has ended. The makhzen then sends a mule to the Sultan of the Tolba, who mounts it and slips away in the middle of the night, hastening back to his madrasa. The mule becomes his property, but he returns the horses provided by the makhzen, as well as the borrowed tents, keeping only his own. Through this ritualised flight and restitution, the festival is definitively concluded. (Doutté, 1909, pp. 199-201).

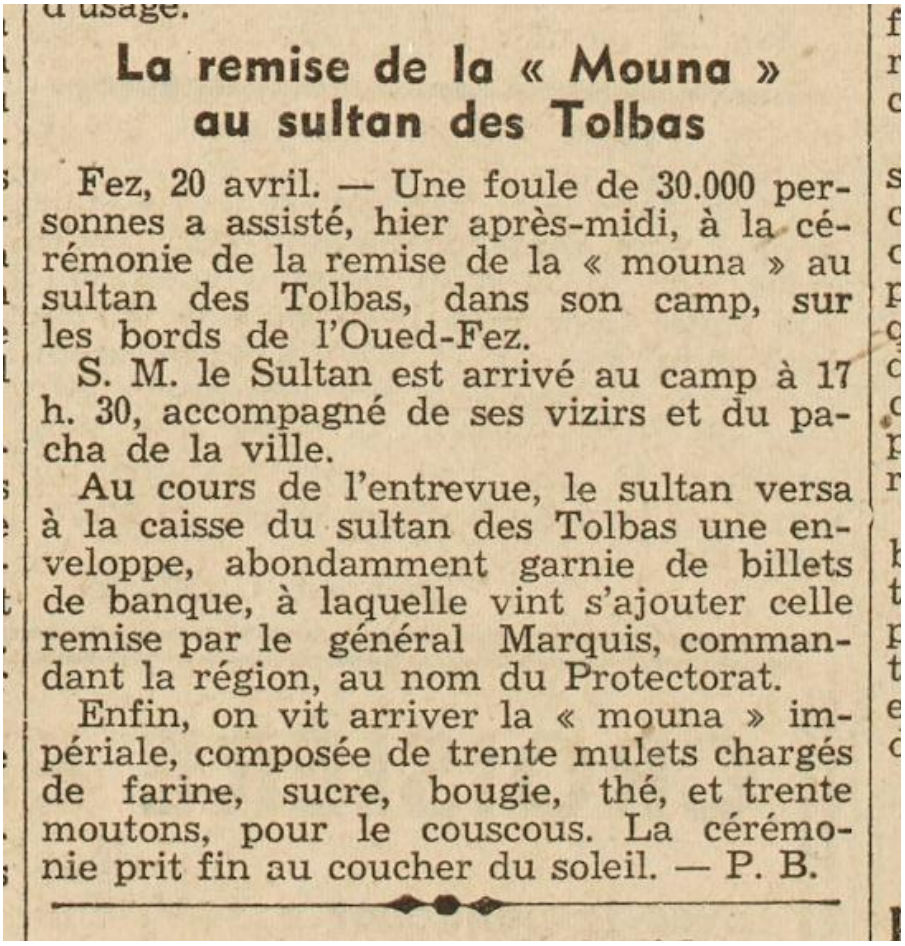
Figure 4: The court of Sultan Tolba, from *Le Maroc pittoresque, Fès* by Alfred Bel and Larribe, 1917

4. Sultan Tolba and Colonial Protectorate

When France established the Protectorate over Morocco in 1912, colonial authorities quickly became attentive to the symbolic and political significance of the Sultan Tolba ritual. Far from dismissing it as a harmless folkloric survival, French administrators recognised the festival as a powerful site of collective mobilisation, public visibility, and symbolic sovereignty centred on students—an especially sensitive social group in a colonial context. Rather than suppressing the ritual outright, the Protectorate sought to appropriate and domesticate it by integrating it into the colonial order. This strategy included the continued authorisation of the festival, the dispatch of official *hadiya* in the form of monetary gifts and provisions, and the orchestration of ceremonial audiences between colonial representatives and the Sultan of the Tolba. By maintaining the outward forms of royal patronage—while subtly redirecting their meaning—the Protectorate aimed to neutralise the ritual's subversive potential, transform it into a regulated spectacle, and reinscribe it within a framework of colonial governance that sought continuity with sharifian tradition even as it reconfigured sovereignty itself.

After the establishment of the Protectorate, French civil and military authorities regularly visited the festival and provided it with material and financial support. The Resident General himself paid the customary visit to the Sultan of the Tolba (*La Dépêche Coloniale*, 17 May 1919). *The Bulletin Officiel* reports that on the afternoon of 24 April 1916, Lyautey

> *went to the encampment of the Tolba, established in the beautiful meadows bordering the Oued Fez, a short distance from the city. There, each spring, following an ancient custom, the students of the University gather for their traditional festival amid a large assembly of the population, after having elected from among themselves a Sultan who, for the duration of the festivities, governs them while performing all the rites of the Sharifian court. The Resident General was received by the Sultan of the Tolba, who recited in his honour the sacred prayer of the Fatiḥa—the opening verse of the Qur'an—and to whom he presented an offering that enabled the Tolba to continue their festival for several days. (The Bulletin Officiel, 26 June 1916, p. 642)*



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La remise de la « Mouna » au sultan des Tolbas

Fez, 20 avril. — Une foule de 30.000 personnes a assisté, hier après-midi, à la cérémonie de la remise de la « mouna » au sultan des Tolbas, dans son camp, sur les bords de l'Oued-Fez.

S. M. le Sultan est arrivé au camp à 17 h. 30, accompagné de ses vizirs et du pacha de la ville.

Au cours de l'entrevue, le sultan versa à la caisse du sultan des Tolbas une enveloppe, abondamment garnie de billets de banque, à laquelle vint s'ajouter celle remise par le général Marquis, commandant la région, au nom du Protectorat.

Enfin, on vit arriver la « mouna » impériale, composée de trente mulets chargés de farine, sucre, bougie, thé, et trente moutons, pour le couscous. La cérémonie prit fin au coucher du soleil. — P. B.

Figure 5: "Mouna" is gifted to the Sultan Tolba by the reigning sultan and the Protectorate administration, from *La Dépêche algérienne*, 21 April 1933

What emerges is a ritual preserved not as an autonomous expression of popular sovereignty, but as a domesticated pageant, reoriented toward colonial spectatorship and governance. Under the French Protectorate, colonial institutions themselves became incorporated into the Sultan Tolba ritual. The mock sovereign did not confine his epistolary exchanges to makhzen officials but also addressed representatives of the Protectorate administration. The following two letters offer a striking illustration of how the Sultan Tolba ritual extended beyond festive performance into the realm of written parody and bureaucratic mimicry. In this exchange, the Sultan of the Students, Mohamed Eddoukali, engages in mock-official correspondence with M. de Chavigny, Head of the Department of State Domains under the French Protectorate:

> *Praise be to God! Imprint of the seal of Sultan Tolba, Mohamed Eddoukali. To Our Servant, M. de Chavigny, Director of State Properties. Greetings. Do your utmost in the task of laying hands on the properties of third parties in order to incorporate them into Our domain and thereby increase it, in accordance with the established rule. Moreover, We have issued sharifian instructions to all governors and holders of Our Authority, instructing them to lend you their support in this matter and to ensure the execution of all decisions taken by the Department at whose head We have placed you. Should you require assistance, We place at your disposal Our numerous troops of storks and mosquitoes, encamped along the banks of the Oued al Jawahir, ready to carry out Our orders. In the meantime, you are requested to send, by return post and together with your renewed submission, the sum of 766 million, in order to provide for the provisioning of the said troops. Avoid any delay. Peace. The 225th of Ramadan, year 8376 of the Sharifian era. (Basset, 1917, p. 35)*

M. de Chavigny, Head of the Department of State Domains, replies in a similarly parodic tone, addressing the mock sovereign through the same exaggerated bureaucratic language and ceremonial conventions:

> *Praise be to God alone! From the Servant of His Majesty, de Chavigny, Director of State Properties, to the Most August, etc., The Sultan of the Tolba, Our Lord and Master Mohamed Eddoukali, may God preserve him in greatness! After performing the hand-kissing due to Your Highness, I received with respect and submission the orders of Your Majesty. I was pleased to see that You recognise the excellence of our services and that You confirm us in the right path. You instruct us to continue incorporating into the Bayt al-Mal—may God fill it!—the properties of private individuals, in accordance with the established rule. You also instruct us to send You the sum of 776 million in order to provide for the mouna and the retba of Your armies of storks and mosquitoes encamped at the Oued al Jawahir. All of this has been duly noted. Know, O Venerated Master, that I continue to lay hands on all movable and immovable property existing within Your empire, such as houses, cultivated lands, olive groves, old cannons, etc. And this is only just, for when such goods belong to no one, the Bayt al-Mal is entitled to recover them as vacant property, in accordance with the Sunna. On this occasion, I must report to Your Majesty a matter that concerns You personally. In an old kunnash of the Makhzen, I discovered that Your Majesty owns a certain number of properties located in Tafdalet, at the Casbah of the Makhzen, and at the Oued Drâa, designated in the margin opposite, which must revert to the Bayt al-Mal in accordance with the orders issued by Moulay el-Hiba on this matter. I had these properties assessed by expert harbab al-basur; the expert report establishes their value at 765 million, 999,951 mithqals, 6 ouqias, 2 nouzounas, 17 fels, and 5 grains. Consequently, of the 766 million which Your Majesty instructs me to send Him, I am therefore indebted only for the difference, namely 48 mithqals, 3 ouqias, 1 nouzouna, 6 fels, and 3 grains. However, I am unable even to send this sum to Your Majesty, for You are not unaware that as soon as I lay hands on a property, the Administration of the Habous immediately claims it; so that my treasury is empty! I therefore humbly request that Your Majesty issue severe orders to the illustrious Ocean of Knowledge, the Minister of Habous, the faqih Sidi Ahmed al-Jai, as well as to his zealous collaborator M. Biarnay, so that they may cease this unfair competition, or at least agree to share with me the recovered properties. I would then be able to send Your Majesty the above-mentioned sum, and many others besides. Greetings, At midday in the month of May, year 17 before the Hijri era. (Ibid.)*

The letter offers a striking example of the French colonial administration's playful yet highly controlled mastery of Moroccan bureaucratic and epistolary language, mobilised here as much for satire as for display. Written in impeccable *makhzani* form—replete with ritual blessings, exaggerated humility, technical fiscal vocabulary (*Bayt al-Mal*, *mouna*, *retba*), and meticulous monetary reckoning, M. de Chavigny's missive mimics indigenous administrative prose so convincingly that it becomes a parody from within. Humour emerges not through overt mockery, but through a hyperbolic fidelity to Moroccan bureaucratic logic, pushed to deliberately absurd extremes. This comic excess, however, betrays a deeper colonial confidence: the ability to outwit the Sultan of the Tolba and to outperform him on his own rhetorical terrain, wit, humour, and satire.

Figure 6: Sultan Tolba in his royal tent with French journalists, from *L'Afrique du Nord illustrée*, 30 May 1931

By 1950, the *nzaha* carnival of Sultan Tolba had been fully integrated into colonial ceremonial protocol. French authorities regularly visited the royal encampment, transforming the student festival into a supervised ritual of symbolic exchange. That year, the Sultan of the Tolba was Moujadid ben Abdeslam al Arossi. His secretary, the talib Bou Selham Bel Ayachi, delivered "the speech of his sovereign," which was officially answered by Colonel Butzer. He said:

> *For nearly thirty years that I have been in Fez, I have not yet had the opportunity to preside over this beautiful celebration, at which I have, however, attended many times. Today, owing to the absence of General Laparra, who has left for France for a few days, it falls to me the great honour of acting as the representative of the Resident General before the Sultan of the Tolbas and of presenting to him the gift of General Juin. Your Majesty, it is a great honour to take this opportunity to convey to you the interest of the Government in the destinies of the University of Qarwiyyine. Its glorious past guarantees its bright future, and the Administration will never cease to devote all its efforts to ensuring its progress. But this effort would amount to nothing if you yourselves, and the brilliant core of students, did not unite your efforts with ours and all your goodwill. I wish that your ephemeral reign may, in some way, resemble my own intermediary role, and that it may be happy and prosperous in every respect. I wish you joy around your throne, and, to sustain this joy, I bring you this festive budget, which I present to you on behalf of the Resident General. May this springtime reign endure long, and may it bring with it long periods and grant you abundant rain, beneficial to the harvests of future months. (Le Courrier du Maroc, 12 April 1950)*

Under the French Protectorate, the festival of the Sultan of the Tolba was progressively absorbed into the machinery of colonial governance and ceremonial control. French civil and military authorities routinely visited the royal encampment, were granted formal audiences with the Sultan of the Tolba and his court, exchanged pleasantries, shared tea, and posed for official photographs. Protectorate officials were explicitly incorporated into the ritual itself: the Sultan's speeches increasingly acknowledged French authority, were translated into French by colonial intermediaries, and were answered by senior officers who offered the *hadiya* in the form of substantial monetary gifts, often ceremonially presented in sealed envelopes. Colonial infrastructure further facilitated the event, with

special bus services organised to transport crowds and officials to the encampment. The festival attracted French guests alongside Moroccan notables and mobilised musicians from across the country and cavalry contingents drawn from various tribes, transforming the *nzaha* into a carefully staged display of order, loyalty, and pacification. Widely announced and narrated by colonial newspapers, the Sultan of the Tolba was routinely referred to with honorifics such as "His Majesty," "His Highness," or "Prince," while the programme of festivities and the sultan's movements were meticulously covered by the press. In this way, what had once functioned as a carnivalesque inversion of authority was reframed as a colonial spectacle—regulated, mediated, and symbolically subordinated to the political logic of the Protectorate.

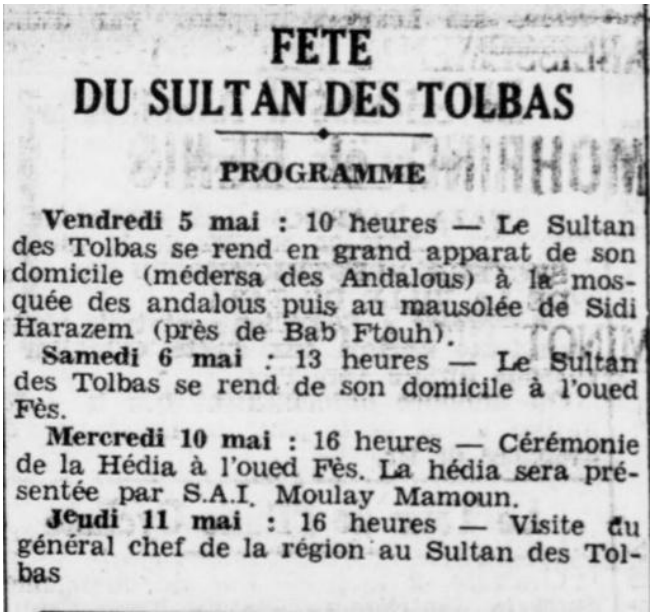

KILOSA
Sous-Vêtement périodique
imperméable parfait
Indispensable à la Femme soignée.

C. F. 5584. — Chaque printemps, tandis que les jardins se colorent et s'embaument, les « Oulémas » de Fez (professeurs de l'Université) se réunissent avec leurs meilleurs « tolbas » (élèves) en vue d'élire pour huit jours le « sultan des tolbas », dignité qu'un élève achète aux enchères, quelquefois très cher. Il s'entoure alors d'une cour de dignitaires et de vizirs et s'installe aux portes de la ville, sous une tente somptueuse, dressée au bord de l'oued sous les oliviers, les eucalyptus et les grenadiers. Le sultan en personne y va lui faire visite, suivi des notables et de son kalifa. L'empereur véritable accorde à l'autre la grâce de plusieurs condamnés, lui fait don d'un cheval blanc et d'un parasol, et, pendant la semaine de son règne, le « sultan des tolbas » entouré de sa cour, va faire des prières sur les

SOUTIEN-GORGE
CEINTURES

Figure 7: *Ève* (21 June 1931). The bra advertisement insert a short piece on Sultan Tolba. This discursively incongruous juxtaposition does not merely report on colonial societies; it actively participated in constructing a vision of "civilisation" grounded in French modern femininity, bodily autonomy, and hygienic rationality—values implicitly opposed to what colonial discourse framed as traditional, ritualised, or archaic social worlds.

The juxtaposition of the French brassière with the figure of the Sultan Tolba performs a subtle symbolic operation. The ritualised male carnival of Fez—marked by inversion, masquerade, excess, and collective festivity—serves as an unspoken counter-image against which modern European femininity is implicitly defined.



FETE
DU SULTAN DES TOLBAS

PROGRAMME

Vendredi 5 mai : 10 heures — Le Sultan des Tolbas se rend en grand apparat de son domicile (médersa des Andalous) à la mosquée des andalous puis au mausolée de Sidi Harazem (près de Bab Ftouh).

Samedi 6 mai : 13 heures — Le Sultan des Tolbas se rend de son domicile à l'oued Fès.

Mercredi 10 mai : 16 heures — Cérémonie de la Hédia à l'oued Fès. La hédia sera présentée par S.A.I. Moulay Mamoun.

Jeudi 11 mai : 16 heures — Visite du général chef de la région au Sultan des Tolbas

Figure 8: Programme of Sultan Tolba's festival, from *Le Courrier du Maroc*, 3 May 1939.

The festival of Sultan Tolba was incorporated into French tourist discourse on Morocco as a cultural attraction, featuring prominently in tourist promotion and guidebooks such as Marcel Monmarché's *Le Maroc* (Les Guides Bleus, 1919).

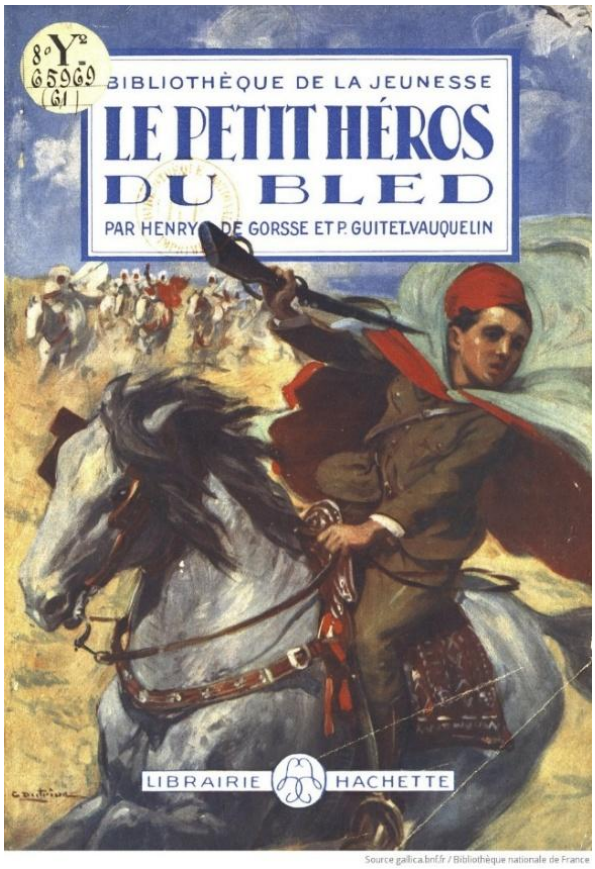


Figure 9: *Le Petit Héros du Bled* by Henry de Gorsse (1927). The illustrated juvenile novel features a chapter entitled "La Fête des Tolbas," situating the festival within a colonial adventure narrative.

5. Ritual Discipline and Latent Dissent

In his study of Fez, Roger Le Tourneau remarks on the striking restraint that characterised the festival of the Sultan Tolba. Historical sources reveal no evidence that the students of Fez ever provoked serious disturbances in the city: no chronicler records the madrasas as participating in sieges, nor does the Qarawiyyin quarter appear as a site of sustained social or political agitations. At most, madrasa residents occasionally expressed their discontent when bread was of poor quality or irregularly distributed. Le Tourneau thus expresses surprise that four or five hundred vigorous young men madrasa tolba did not more frequently make themselves heard. To explain this apparent paradox, he explains in a particularly revealing passage,

> *Their concern for the dignity of their status as students of theology may have played a role, but I believe the principal reason must be sought in the considerable social constraint exerted by the milieu of Fez. The few dozen rural youths who arrived there each year immediately felt as though caught in a society that imposed itself upon them through its culture, urbanity, and refinement. At first, they could only be fascinated by it. Certainly, after a few months, habit might have enabled them to react and to escape this spell; but by then it was already too late: they were no longer what they had been upon arrival. A sense of respectability had already taken hold of them under the influence of their teachers, the general atmosphere, and even their more senior fellow students, guiding them—like the rest of the city—to understand that the student was a distinct, semi-sacred figure who could not take part in the city's futile agitations without compromising his own self-respect. They had learned not to give in to momentary impulses and to do nothing except in accordance with tradition and rule, without adding anything of their own: even burlesque itself was conventional, strictly limited by custom. (Le Tourneau, 1949, pp. 469-470)*

For Le Tourneau, both the festival of the Sultan Tolba and the urban milieu of Fez have a profound domesticating effect on the rural students. Rather than fostering political challenge, the festival functioned within a dense framework of social control shaped by the city's cultural authority. Newly arrived rural youths, initially outsiders, were rapidly absorbed into an urban environment that asserted its hegemony through refinement, learning, and ritualised conduct.

Yet this interpretation risks reducing the Sultan Tolba to a politically empty diversion, a view that reflects a broader colonial tendency to neutralise the ritual's significance. Despite colonial attempts, such as Le Tourneau's, to reduce the Sultan Tolba to a mere diversion for a decadent society and to portray it as a politically empty festival, the tradition also provided a symbolic space in which social and political tensions could be expressed. Far from being devoid of meaning, it was capable of reflecting conflicts over authority, hierarchy, and legitimacy within Moroccan society itself. It is from this broader analytical perspective that the Sultan of the Tolba must be situated in earlier periods of dynastic instability.

Following the death of Sidi Mohammed ben Abdallah in 1790, Morocco entered a period of acute dynastic instability marked by violent succession struggles among his sons. Addaïif records that in April 1797, at the Sharatine Madrasa, the tolba prepared to depart for the nuzha at Oued Fez, but because of dynastic rivalry, disagreements arose over who should be appointed amir among them. The tolba of the Jbala aligned themselves with the urban students, while those from Chaouia and Doukkala joined the rural tolba. The student body thus split into two rival groups, each appointing its own amir. Mohamed Addaïif further notes:

> *On Sunday, the 25th of Shawwal, all the tolba departed for the nuzha at Oued Fez. The tolba of Jbel went out with their sultan from the Ṣaffarin Madrasa, while the sultan of the Bedouin tolba emerged from the Sharatine Madrasa beneath a parasol, marching in procession*

> *through the centre of the medina. All the tolba carried muskets and girded their swords, and I went out with them to Oued Fez. (Addaïf, 1986, p. 284)*

This episode demonstrates that the *nuzha* of Sultan Tolba was not merely a festive abstraction, but a ritual arena in which social, regional, and political divisions could be symbolically articulated. Even within a ritualised framework, the possibility of rivalry, factional alignment, and implicit confrontation was ever present.

It was precisely this latent potential for disorder that later attracted the close attention of colonial authorities. The Protectorate remained acutely aware of the ritual's latent subversive potential. During one of his visits to Sultan Tolba, Hubert Lyautey remarked jokingly—though with evident seriousness—that "he had not come alone and that he would have recourse to numerous forces in the event that the sultan of the day might entertain some ideas of insurrection." (*Alger-étudiant*, 31 May 1924) The remark betrays the fragile boundary between managed festivity and political threat, and the colonial anxiety that parody might at any moment tip into revolt.

The political potential of the Fez tolba was not lost on contemporary observers. In January 1938, Roland Dorgelès published a subtly pointed article in *Le Grand Écho* (*Le Grand Écho*, 8 January 1938), later reprinted in several newspapers, in which he reflected on the latent political subversiveness of the Tolba of Fez. He noted how a seemingly minor administrative decree, limiting madrasa tenure to ten years, was sufficient to spark a unified uprising. "It took no more than this to rouse the youth," he observes, as senior students denounced the measure as an assault on custom while nationalists seized the opportunity to protest. The ensuing unrest led the Islamic students to organise a sit-down strike, forcing a military response as tensions spread into the souks. The *tolba* even began to formulate demands, notably calling on the *majlis* for an "expansion of the curriculum." What had begun as a seemingly administrative adjustment thus quickly escalated into collective action. One morning, the doors of the five madrasas were found closed as the students launched their strike.

The apparent resolution of the crisis did little to dispel Dorgelès's unease. Writing from the May festivities of the Sultan of the Tolba, Dorgelès sketches a scene of disciplined conformity: students of al-Qarawiyyin politely applauding the French general who awarded the traditional scholarship. Yet the article closes on a note of ominous ambiguity. Beneath this ritualised obedience, he suggests, there may be germinating "the Roghi of tomorrow," the rebel figure who periodically emerges in the history of Morocco to overturn its course. Even the carnivalesque exchange with the jester during the Tolba *nuzha*—who offers Dorgelès "the stones of the Atlas"—is refigured as a dark metaphor, prompting his sharp retort: "I do not like receiving stones." In this final image, humour, ritual inversion, and political foreboding converge, revealing the tolba not merely as a folkloric curiosity but as a potential site where latent dissent and historical rupture might take shape.

If such moments of overt mobilisation remained relatively rare, the ritual nonetheless subjected colonial authority to symbolic exposure through satire rather than direct confrontation. A telling illustration appears earlier, in the spring of 1917, when Henri Gouraud visited the encampment of the Sultan of the Tolbas and paid him formal homage, declaring that although "he had already had the honour of conversing with many sovereigns," none equalled the student-sultan "in brilliance, power, high intelligence, and so forth." According to contemporary accounts, the mock sultan appeared deeply touched by the general's benevolence and his willingness to participate in the students' ritual play. Yet no sooner had the general departed than the carnivalesque logic of the festival reasserted itself. Taking full advantage of the burlesque licence of the *nuzha*, the Sultan Tolba—as reported in *Midi Colonial* (*Midi Colonial*, 24 May 1917)—promptly dictated a series of letters to the heads of the Residency's departments, accusing them, in accordance with established custom, of the gravest extortions and summoning them to return the money they had allegedly stolen. Significantly, the available reports do not mention similar letters being addressed to Moroccan *makhzen* officials. While this silence does not in itself prove intentional selectivity, it may indicate that, under the Protectorate, colonial

administrators had become particularly legible—and perhaps safer—targets for ritualised satire within the licensed space of carnival.

Such episodes invite a broader theoretical reflection on the political logic of carnival itself. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualises the carnivalesque as a momentary suspension of social and political hierarchy in which authority is mocked and transgressed through humour, chaos, and what he terms "grotesque realism." Bakhtin writes,

> *The suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions was the essential feature of carnival…. This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10)*

Carnival laughter, at once joyous and critical, destabilises the seriousness of official culture by exposing its rigidity to parody and exaggeration. Yet the carnivalesque does not simply destroy hierarchy; rather, it temporarily inverts it, creating a liminal space in which power can be symbolically contested. Carnival, therefore, functions as a sanctioned arena of subversion, allowing challenges to authority to emerge within the very structures that attempt to contain them.

The burlesque practices of the Sultan Tolba festival reflect this carnivalesque logic. Through satirical letters, exaggerated decrees, and accusations directed at colonial administrators, the mock sultan appropriated the formal language of authority only to render it absurd. In doing so, these performances temporarily reversed the symbolic hierarchy that structured colonial rule. Such moments resonate strongly with Homi Bhabha's theorisation of colonial ambivalence and native agency, particularly in his essays "Sly Civility" and "Signs Taken for Wonders." For Bhabha, colonial authority is never fully stable because acts of native mimicry—however playful or seemingly naïve—can subtly unsettle the coloniser's claim to coherence and mastery. As he writes, colonial intervention, even as it seeks to institutionalise and normalise its authority, is always haunted by displacement and uncertainty:

> *That the process of colonial intervention, its institutionalization and normalization, may itself be an Enstellung, a displacement, is the symbolic reality that must be disallowed. It is this ambivalence that ensues within paranoia as a play between eternal vigilance and blindness, and estranges the image of authority in its strategy of justification. (Bhabha, 1994. p. 100)*

Within this framework, colonial authority—whether embodied by figures such as Lyautey or narrated by observers like Dorgelès—appears fractured by the ambivalent return of the native gaze. The mock sultan's burlesque decrees and satirical accusations against the French administration and visiting military officials can thus be read, in Bhabha's terms, as moments in which "the natives are both challenging the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its terms by setting up another specifically colonial space of the negotiations of cultural authority. And they do this under the eye of power." (Ibid., p. 119) By appropriating the language of sovereignty and turning it into parody, the *tolba* thus created what Bhabha describes as a specifically colonial space of negotiation of cultural authority—one that operates under the very gaze of power. The carnivalesque performance of Sultan Tolba therefore functioned as a form of textual insurrection against the discourse of colonial mastery, simultaneously mimicking, exaggerating, and destabilising the symbolic grammar of colonial authority.

Seen in this light, the Sultan Tolba ritual did not merely accommodate colonial authority but actively subjected it to carnivalesque inversion. By adopting the voice of sovereign justice and accusing colonial administrators of corruption, the mock sultan temporarily reversed the asymmetry of power, transforming colonial officials into objects of satire. Much like medieval court jesters or licensed buffoons, Sultan Tolba exercised a socially sanctioned right to speak truth through exaggeration, ridicule, and parody. The humour did not negate political meaning; rather, it enabled critique precisely because it was framed as play.

6. Conclusion

Sultan Tolba was never a mere folkloric diversion. Across nearly three centuries, it functioned as a structured institution through which the *tolba* of Fez enacted a temporary, mimetic sovereignty—complete with a court, decrees, processions, sacred itineraries, and a final ritual restitution that restored the ordinary order. Its power lay precisely in its ambivalence: it licensed parody and burlesque while binding them to formalised rules; it mocked authority while borrowing its insignia; and it created a public space in which popular participation and student collectivity could be staged without openly rupturing established hierarchies.

Under the French Protectorate, this ambivalence became an object of governance and surveillance. Colonial authorities understood that the festival's political significance resided not only in what it symbolised, but in what it did. It assembled bodies, redistributed visibility, and rehearsed sovereignty as performance. Rather than abolishing the ritual, the Protectorate incorporated it into its own repertoire of rule and protocol, delivering gifts, visiting the encampment, and reproducing makhzenian gestures in ways designed to be seen, read, and internalised by local elites. Testimonies such as that of Louis de Barthou reveal how colonial protocol was meticulously observed, whether in the palace of the reigning sultan or in the tent of the mock *talib*-sultan, collapsing dynastic authority and its parody into a single ceremonial grammar. At the same time, moments of tension, Lyautey's guarded humour or the memory of the 1936 madrasa strike recalled by Dorgelès, expose the fragility of this management. Parody could always tilt toward mobilisation, and carnival remained shadowed by the possibility of rupture and *tolba* insurrection.

Seen in this light, Sultan Tolba under the Protectorate exemplifies a broader colonial technique: governing through controlled continuity, in which ritual was preserved not to safeguard indigenous autonomy but to reshape meanings, neutralise dissent, and convert inversion into an instrument of political pedagogy.

Yet the very need for such supervision testifies to the ritual's enduring charge. Viewed within broader debates on colonial governance, ritual, and resistance, the Sultan Tolba festival offers a revealing case through which to examine how colonial power sought to manage and appropriate existing ritual practices. As Michel Foucault famously observed, "where there is power, there is resistance," (Foucault, 1990, p. 95), a dynamic particularly visible in the colonial management of ritual life. Even when incorporated into colonial protocol, ritual performance continued to provide a space in which satire, parody, and symbolic inversion could subtly expose and destabilise structures of power. In this sense, Sultan Tolba illustrates how colonial governance and cultural resistance were negotiated through ritual practices. Carnival was never simply tamed; it was surveilled—because within its laughter persisted both the memory and the potential of collective political agency.

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