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Lalla Khnata Bint Bakkar
TWO POLITICAL LETTERS

Morocco 1729, 1736 Arabic

In 1678, Sultan Moulay Ismail Ibn Sharif of the Alaouite dynasty, which took power in Morocco in 1666 and remains its royal family today, paid a visit to Shinquit, in the deep south of the country. The leader of that region, Sheikh Bakkar, offered his daughter to "Ismail the Great" in marriage as a token of his people's allegiance to the sultan. Lalla Khnata Bint Bakkar became one the sultan's many wives, but she was far from typical. The princess was a skilled politician and diplomat and even an accomplished horsewoman, and she built a library of some twelve thousand volumes. Her husband sought her views on many occasions, trusting her intelligence and her accurate assessments. She served as a minister and adviser to the sultan and sometimes acted as his private secretary as well, since her command of Arabic was excellent.

When Moulay Ismail died in 1727 without nominating anyone to replace him, bloody riots ensued. The sultan had several hundred sons, but Lalla Khnata's wisdom and political skill helped her son, Moulay Abdallah, take the throne, although he would lose and regain it six times between 1728 and 1749 as battles over the succession continued.

Lalla Khnata was an important partner during her son's reign. She lived in the capital, Meknes, while Moulay Abdallah traveled to manage political campaigns. She inspected the army on his behalf, undertook a number of local initiatives, and was in charge of protocol and receiving foreign dignitaries. Akensus, head of the army, described her as a true scholar, as well as a "virtuous" woman with a "strong religious faith. She was a scholar and I saw her handwritten notes on the margin of a book by Ibn Hajjar." The eminent historian Magali Mursi said of her: "She is the actual, legal heir of Moulay Ismail. We can say she deserved the crown. She had the strongest personality among all the contenders for the throne, including her son." She was also praised by France's King Louis XV, who sent her a letter in which he described her as "the Great Sultan" and requested her assistance in some matters of benefit to both kingdoms.

Moulay Abdallah, however, often refused her advice, feeling it a disgrace to rely on a woman. When Lalla Khnata learned that her son was plotting against her, in 1730 she decided to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, taking along her eleven-year-old grandson. During the journey she strengthened diplomatic relations with Libya and Egypt, and saw to it that the future Sultan Mohamed III was introduced to politics at an early age. Lalla Khnata died at about the age of eighty, in 1746 in Fes, where she is buried.

In the first of two letters included here, Lalla Khnata skillfully negotiates for the release of Flemish prisoners held in Morocco. She sends a trusted emissary, a Jewish businessman, to complete the arrangements, which clearly include some payment of ransom by the Flemish.

The second letter deals with problems taking place on the border shared with Algeria. Algeria had long been part of the Ottoman Empire, and the Turks were trying to expand their hegemony. In a voice as confident as a king's, Lalla Khnata writes to the people of Oujda, reassuring residents of the border city that they are under the protection of the Moroccan sovereign.

Khadija Zizi

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First Letter

To the Flemish States,
19 June 1729, Meknes

All Praise be to God, Peace, and God's prayer be upon the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

To the attention of all the Flemish states, peace is upon those who pursue the path of redemption. Please be informed that your brothers have cried before our blessed son, may his crops bear fruit, and knelt at his feet, in an endeavor to talk to him on behalf of their brothers and their liberation and also in your coming to us with your presents. We then acquiesced and permitted the non-Muslim merchant Isaac Shmika to come to you and converse with you, since we trust him. So we are sending him to you. We would like you to trust him and those accompanying him in all he says regarding all matters, including the gift and the ransom. Whoever comes along with him needs to be satisfied. We hope he will accomplish this journey with success and return to us in the protection of God.

Drafted on the twenty-second Dhu Al Qi'dah al-haram in the year one thousand one hundred and forty one.

Written under the instruction and order of the protected by the will of God, her Highness, Mother of our Sovereign, may God protect him and preserve him to his fellow Muslims, Lalla Khnata Bint Bakkar, may God be with her.

Translated by Khadija Zizi

Second Letter

To the People of Oujda,
24 May 1736, Meknes.
All Praise be to God and peace be upon his Prophet Muhammad.

To our servants, the people of Oujda, peace be upon you all and God is protecting you. We implore God to grant you prosperity and health, and we implore Him to grant our Sovereign power and triumph over his enemies. We do not want you to worry. We know your strong faith in and allegiance to our Sovereign. Do not worry about what those bitter people are doing. We are, with the assistance of God Almighty, more powerful than they are. In any case, you are our subjects. So don't fear anyone, whether you go East or West, whether or not you travel. We are capable of defeating them. Whoever attacks you attacks us and will face severe reprisals. I advise you to put the Shorfa Wlad Belqaid under your protection. No one should get near them. Treat them the way we treat them. Whoever attacks them runs the risk of being defeated. By permission of the Mistress of the divine and blessed house, Lady Hajja Khnata Bint Bakkar, may God glorify us and her.

Translated by Moha Ennaji and Khadija Zizi