



Baladi Bio Farm

By IAPC-ROOTS

On March 7, 2024, during a trip with aims to know the agriculture practices in several African countries, the Baobab team, the International Association for Popular Cooperation ([IAPC](https://www.iapc.org/)), visited an agroecological farm in Morocco. Just as many other regions, Morocco has a long way to go in agroecology and the country has its own challenges regarding access to land, water systems, and concepts that need to be stressed.

Said's farm is located a 2-hour drive from Marrakech, Morocco's famous ancient city. Being next to a desert, and just by looking at the surroundings, lots of questions came into our mind. How does a farm operate in such a dry area? How is the land ownership system in Morocco? Are agroecological practices common in the country? All of these questions were then answered in the later visit, which led us to broader reflections beyond the farm itself. Join us to explore them!



The farm

Said's farm, in the Mzoudia rural community, lies halfway between Marrakech and Essouira on the Atlantic coast. The land is arid and dominated by rubble, sand and small dried bushes, giving it a grey and dusty appearance. As we turn from the narrow road onto a dirt road, a speck of green appears in the distance, straight green rows of olive trees with alfalfa between them.

Said greets us at the gate of the Baladi farm, where he has been cultivating 14 hectares of land for 5 years. The farm is divided into 3 parts: production of mulch, fertilizer and animal feed, an organic olive orchard, and the raising of sheep. He shows us his flock, a Moroccan breed of "D'man" and "sardi" sheep. They are hand-raised with a special mix of feed from the young lambs protected in the stable to the 50 big sheep in the compound.

All of the sheep have been already sold to the neighboring communities for the upcoming Aïd el-Kébir, the Feast of Sacrifice (or Aïd al-Adha), celebrated every year by Muslims all over the world. Moroccan families celebrate this religious holiday and social tradition, which includes the ritual slaughtering a sheep.

Amidst the bleating sheep, Said shares the story of how he became an agroecological farmer and teacher, and takes us on a tour of the olive tree orchard and the production field.



Said's sheep. Source: Baobab archive.



Sheep's feed: a mix of dates and hay. Source: Baobab archive.



Olive trees in the farm. Source: Baobab archive.

Said's land

The ownership of the land belongs to the Makhzen, the governing institution in Morocco, and the real estate system has developed its own laws and administrations: a one-time payment is necessary to obtain permanent development rights. This title can be transferred, bequeathed or sold. However, this license to use can also be revoked at a moment's notice by a royal decree, allowing the state to repossess the land without compensation. This is more likely to occur in cases where the land is valuable, where water is plentiful or for other reasons, like public interest. This land system entails a precarious situation for peasants and farmers, which is exemplary for most of Morocco's rural population.

Pre-colonial tribal relationships of land ownership were very dynamic, with land allocated based on demographic needs, such as the number of families. Under colonial rule this balance was upended, creating landlords and a system which is prone to be exploited by big agribusiness, corrupt officials, arbitrary seizure of land with no benefit to the population.



Agroecology, a holistic approach

Said never thought of becoming a farmer himself. His father upon retiring, became a bit of a hobby farmer in the area, which inspired Said to discover his own calling. He went to take courses on agriculture in Rabat, where he learned about other projects in the area based on agroecology and organic agriculture, and he learned from French websites and online sources – and from the earth and the plants themselves. “Now I look at the plants, like the olive trees, and I know what they need, and I can prepare the right kind of fertilizer or medicine to provide them”, he told us. His laboratory for understanding agroecology is the earth itself.

Sheep farming also wasn't something Said initially planned to pursue, it started as an experiment to provide local communities with organic meat and to integrate agroecological practices. Now, sheep farming has become important and plays a strong role in ecological farming.

The neighbours trusted his process and bought the meat, although he did not have any certificate of organic production during the early years, he is now Ecocert certified, a certification body that assesses the conformity of a product, a service or a system with environmental and social requirements specified in a standard. In both his own learning and the training he provides, Said feels organic certifications fall short of recognition of the agroecology process which he considers to be much more holistic and extend beyond the actual product to the care of the land and care of the communities.



Said applying compost around the olive trees. Source: Baobab archive.

Water

For the past 6 years a severe drought has been plaguing Morocco. So far in 2024, there have only been two days of rain and the scorched earth around Said's property is a stark testament to that. The water source on the property is groundwater: drawn from three wells, two are 66 meters deep and one is 140 meters deep. The pumps are 15 horsepower, powered by solar energy panels which cannot store energy.

The farm is set up in a complete cycle: Said makes the food for the sheep, a special diet of dates and hay, which even gives the manure a pleasant smell. The material ends up in a fertilizer fermentation process and then is used on the olive trees. The mulch produced keeps the moisture in the earth.



The farm is next to an immense desert, where irrigation is a big challenge. Source: Baobab archive.

Said waters the orchard for only one 1 hour a day with a drip irrigation system, which the set up was complicated and time-intensive, though there were some subsidies from the state available.

The land needed to be manually prepared, stones were removed and it is currently not tilled with machines. Due to the lack of precipitation in this land, the farm yields results met with disbelief by people unfamiliar with the process set up.

To Said, it is obvious that peasants need to acquire ecological knowledge. For example, they often don't realise that crops require very little water, so he encourages peasants to come and learn the knowledge for themselves.

Community

Seven people are employed on the farm, sometimes more, depending on the season. Since employees at Said's farm are required to have agroecology



knowledge and practical experience, and not many people meet this requirement, he has been training and teaching people in this practice.

Said's training has extended beyond his farm needs, and currently trains about 60 people per year. Participants include private individuals and members of cooperatives and institutions. Depending on availability and season, trainees will stay on the farm for about a month. Some trainees come to study out of personal interest, some come to pick up the knowledge to start their own businesses, and some come looking for job opportunities.

Said firmly believes that agroecology has to be taught to all of humanity, as a matter of life and death because it is a tool that sustains biodiversity and human life on the planet.

Conclusion

There are a lot of challenges, such as drought, a lack of subsidies or limited investments into the farm. Because of his expertise, Said has been offered consulting jobs by development programmes of the European Union. But he loves the land and considers his work on the farm necessary, fulfilling and spiritual. Said's philosophy is: Every peasant should learn agroecology. It is like the oar of their rowboat, a tool that gives farmers the means to reach their destination which they can see on the horizon. It is this process of empowerment which knowledge of and respect for the natural environment, the land and the producers of food, that makes agroecology a way of addressing Morocco's unique challenges.