

# Plan Bee: The Case of an Islamic Honey Cooperative in Morocco

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SALAH CHAFIK, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON, INSTITUTE FOR INNOVATION AND PUBLIC PURPOSE, UK

## Abstract

*Taddaret Inzerki* is an indigenous honey cooperative (i.e. apiary) in rural Morocco that has operated autonomously for centuries. To understand the devolved status of the apiary, and accordingly, explore the often overlooked field of (non-Western) traditional community-based administrative systems and practices, this essay first provides a brief summary of devolution theory (based on Althusius' *Politica*) and the track record of similar policies in the context of natural resource management. The case of *Taddaret Inzerki*, which is the core contribution of the essay, is then presented along the lines of a Geertzian thick description, revealing both the apiary's historical foundation and its three enduring institutional goals stemming from the rules of the commons: ensuring the welfare of bees, properly treating fellow beekeepers, and fulfilling Islamic requisites. The result for the villagers upholding their sacred craft of Islamic beekeeping is that they are able to generate a reliable livelihood and preserve their shared natural resource commons. However, this essay argues that this administrative arrangement also proves beneficial at the national and even global level, and concludes by suggesting potential avenues of future research.

**Keywords:** Devolution, Althusius, Natural Resource Management, ICCA, *zawāyā*, Islamic Indigenous Cooperative, Islamic Beekeeping, *Taddaret Inzerki*

## 1. Introduction

This essay aims to contribute to research on local devolution, i.e. extensive municipal autonomy or "immunity from interference from the centre" (Føllesdal 2011, 337; see Drechsler 2008, Drechsler 2013a), in an Islamic context by exploring the case of a rural indigenous honey cooperative (i.e. apiary) in Morocco, which in itself is the focus of what follows. Located in the western High Atlas, and founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as an offshoot of a *zāwiya*<sup>1</sup> (a dynamic Islamic institution of both worship and public service provision; see Chafik and Drechsler 2022), *Taddaret Inzerki* is the largest and oldest traditional apiary in the world (Afriyad 2013). Drawing on data collected between autumn 2021 and spring 2022 from extensive ethnographic research, this essay examines how the apiary is organized and run by the local community as a highly autonomous commons with unmistakably sacred (i.e. Islamic) institutional goals, values, and practices, and how this alternative governance arrangement ultimately generates both globally relevant ecological benefits and local, otherwise sparse, economic opportunities. These successes make *Taddaret Inzerki* a clear example of when traditional and seemingly obsolete institutions that have managed to survive at the margins of society

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<sup>1</sup> All non-English (Arabic, Tamazight, Latin) words in the essay are italicized, with the exception of proper names and terms common in English.

are able to step up with readily available and resilient institutional answers to today's needs and challenges (for a Nepalese case, see Shakya 2021, 156–158).

What is particularly interesting from the administrative policy perspective is how and why this arrangement is made the way it is. The Moroccan government included the apiary alongside several thousand local initiatives in its ambitious ~€1.9 billion *Al-Maghrib Al-Akhdar* (Green Morocco) Plan to fund rural agriculture and farming, and granted the apiary national and international (alongside multiple stakeholders) cultural and ecological heritage status and related assistance (Hekking 2020). This support and recognition appear to be part of a broader (post-Arab Spring) national decentralization strategy that has occasionally been criticized for having led to mixed results (Houdret and Harnisch 2019). However, in the case of *Taddaret Inzerki*, this essay argues that the Moroccan state's conscious devolution policy to an Islamic indigenous cooperative has been a successful one indeed – resulting in a 'triple-benefit'. Specifically, the apiary is not only providing the local community with an alternative (Islamic), reliable, and sustainable economic livelihood, but it is through these alternative (Islamic) goals, values, and practices that the apiary cultivates content, exemplar rural citizens who are loyal to the Moroccan state as a matter of piety and identity. Beyond the benefit of local citizens and the state, the positive ecological impact of the apiary and the traditional model by which it is achieved are, perhaps counterintuitively to some, timely and beneficial contributions to our 21<sup>st</sup>-century world.

This essay therefore proceeds with a brief introduction of the theory underlying devolution policy, drawing in particular (from the global-Western perspective's context) on the late Renaissance jurist and philosopher Johannes Althusius, contemporary environmental and resource management efforts, and the role of local or indigenous cooperatives in managing the commons. Section 3 begins the case study by discussing the foundation and history of the apiary – the context of which is necessary for understanding both its enduring Islamic status and its suitability for devolution. Section 4 then presents the core findings of the ethnographic research in terms of the apiary's Islamic goals, values, and practices and how that translates into economic and environmental value for the local population. This is followed by Section 5, which argues that the triple-benefit is real, that is, the strategic and mutually beneficial nature of the Moroccan state's devolution policy vis-à-vis the apiary and its broader successes. Section 6 highlights important limitations, questions, and topics for further research raised by the findings (e.g. lessons for local devolution, principles of local-level Islamic Economics, the notion of an Islamic commons, investigating the ecological impact of sacred beekeeping) before Section 7 concludes.

## **2. Devolution, Indigenous Cooperatives, and Natural Resource Commons**

Devolution is a governance principle that is focused on the scale of rights and responsibilities, namely, transferring them from higher to lower levels so as to bring "citizens, local groups and organizations into the policy and decision-making process" (Berkes 2010, 491). One of the earliest and most prominent theorists on devolution is the German jurist and philosopher Johannes Althusius (1563–1638), even to the extent of being credited with being the founding father of modern Western political theory through his conception of Governance (1995, ix).

His work *Politica Methodice Digesta* (1603) (Althusius 1981; Althusius 1995) is helpful both in understanding the origins of devolution theory within the present-day paradigm of governance and administration (Drechsler 2013b, Pollitt 2015) and in highlighting the commonalities in practice with the Islamic paradigm explored through the case of *Taddaret Inzerki*.

Althusius, as the Calvinist town syndic of Emden, adamantly "sought to maintain its autonomy vis-a-vis its Lutheran provincial Lord and the Catholic Emperor" (Føllesdal 1998). He did so by first positing that every human association concerning two or more people is political<sup>2</sup> and can be taxonomized as one of five types, with each successive association being a combination of the preceding one(s): family, *collegium*, city, province, and realm (i.e. the state) (Althusius 1995, xv-xxi).

Of most interest for the present essay is the *collegium*, which maps neatly with the modern term cooperative (apart from gender inclusivity), as it is defined as "three or more men of the same trade, training, or profession [being] united for the purpose of holding in common such things they jointly profess as duty, way of life, or craft" (Althusius 1995, 34). Members of a *collegium* (i.e. colleagues) "live, are ruled, and are obligated in their collegium by the same right and laws ..., and are even punished for proper cause according to them, provided this is done without infringing upon the magistrate or usurping an alien jurisdiction" (Althusius 1995, 36).

As for how and why this autonomy exists, Althusius explains that the state and its leadership (in the form of a magistrate) do not hold supreme authority as in the unchallenged right to arbitrarily pursue and neglect matters of their choosing, but rather they are supreme in the sense of having subordinate magistrates or political associations, i.e. the provinces, cities, *collegium*, and families of the realm:

The magistrate is called supreme because he exercises not his own power, but that of another, namely, the supreme power of the realm of which he is the minister. Or he is so called in relation to inferior and intermediate magistrates who are appointed by and depend upon this supreme power, and for whom he prescribes general laws (1995, 120).

For Althusius, this delegation to, and prescription of general laws upon, subordinate magistrates inherently restricts the direct action of the magistrate (the central state) since "by political understanding a magistrate sees, recognizes, knows, and comprehends the things that he is to do or *to omit* by reason of his office" (1995, 137; author's emphasis). More explicitly, as a matter of principle, the central state should have 'political prudence': the wisdom not to involve itself in matters concerning lower-level (self-governing) political associations, and indeed must recognize the say in and about their own community and its affairs, i.e. their autonomy (Drechsler 2013a).

Naturally, those in closer proximity to these matters should be able to address them in a more adequate manner. This brings us to the principle of subsidiarity, which despite the extensive debate surrounding the application of the concept (Golemboski 2015), is commonly understood to be that decisions and tasks should be taken at the most immediate or local level to where they can be implemented competently (Føllesdal 1998). Based on his observation of Burmese traditional society in the 1950s, the British-German economist E.F. Schumacher identified subsidiarity as the first principle by which large-scale organizations or even society as a whole can succeed (1973).

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<sup>2</sup> Althusius refers to politics itself as "symbiotics", or the art of living together (1995, xv).

However, Althusius stresses that with autonomy comes the necessity of respecting the general laws and higher sovereignty of the magistrate, so that it is not the case that "popular licence be permitted to the extent that it reduces respect for the king or upsets the affairs of the commonwealth" (1995, 175). He continues: "A reverent attitude toward the magistrate derives from imperium and a favourable opinion about the magistrate's exercise of authority. ... This respect for authority is composed of the admiration and fear that arise from the ruler's form of imperium, his greatness, and his moral qualities" (1995, 154). To bring in the Islamic framework, the description put forth by Althusius of this 'reverent attitude' is a strikingly accurate summary of the sacred soft power attributed to the ruling Alawite Monarchy by the Moroccan public due to the Islamic nature of its authority, namely, descent from the Prophet PBUH (Chafik and Drechsler 2022; Daadaoui 2011). The dynamics of the central Moroccan state devolving power to a rural *collegium* in the form of an apiary will be explored shortly.

First, however, it is important to very briefly highlight various contemporary efforts to devolve decision-making authority and responsibility to the local level in the context of community-based natural resource management of forests, wetlands, protected areas, wildlife, etc. These efforts have faced certain recurring challenges, such as the fragmenting of management responsibility for ecosystems, opportunistic seizure of resources by elites and further marginalization of disadvantaged locals, insufficient understanding of the diversity of local institutions, which can range from positive to destructive in terms of natural resources and social relations, and, notoriously, insufficient transfer of powers to local institutions from central authorities (Kamoto et al. 2013; Berkes 2010; Ribot 2002). The common theme among these issues is an externally designed natural resource management devolution policy that ultimately does not value the importance of, nor trust in, local autonomy.

Moreover, although the rhetoric of devolution in the sense of shifting rights and responsibilities to indigenous people as an alternative to costly, ineffective, and aloof centralized control is by now ubiquitous in natural resource management, in practice there are often new institutions created that bear little to no resemblance to indigenous institutions, values, or goals (Natcher and Davis 2007). This runs in stark contrast to the theory of the commons, which empirically highlights and recognizes the role of indigenous institutions (i.e. cooperatives) in managing common property resources in resilient ways (classically, see Ostrom 1990).

Indeed over long historical periods, indigenous cooperatives have been found to conserve, restore, and enhance natural resources and at times even the biodiversity of the commons they populate and administer (Gadgil et al. 1993). This accumulation of traditional ecological knowledge is a lived process that is fundamentally based on honored – in many cases sacred – indigenous values and practices passed on through generations (Berkes 2018). One could argue that this alone warrants inquiry into the case of *Taddaret Inzerki*, especially due to, and this is one of the more striking characteristics of the apiary, its absence from the academic literature (apart from a handful of publications in French). More broadly, although the literature features cases of extant indigenous cooperatives that are intimately tied to a diverse range of belief systems, there is a notable dearth regarding cases of Islamic indigenous cooperatives that are neither historical (Sabrina 2015) nor theoretical (Mangunjaya 2013).

The obvious question for contemporary devolution policy concerning municipal Muslim populations and the management of their natural resources therefore becomes: instead of creating new institutions based on non-local contexts to transfer only limited authority to, would it not be more beneficial for a central state to support, resuscitate (if necessary),

and genuinely devolve power to Islamic indigenous cooperatives that are, and have been, successfully stewarding their local commons? In an attempt to answer, we turn to the case of *Taddaret Inzerki* – the core contribution of the essay – after a note on methods.

The following data were collected through *in situ* ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September and October 2021 in the villages of Inzerki and Tafilalt, in addition to remote follow-up interviews over the subsequent six months with half a dozen villagers. The author, aided by affiliation with and knowledge of the local language and customs, and committed to upholding culturally sensitive research methods (Smith 2021, Archibald et al. 2019, Chilisa 2019) with the indigenous community involved, utilized a discursive approach. The research design was therefore focused on understanding the subjective role and perspectives of embedded actors to understand a social phenomenon through 1) semi-structured interviews around what is happening and how as opposed to justifying why things are as they are (Zittoun 2021), and 2) firsthand participant observation of quotidian activities, i.e. the ‘go-along’ method of ethnographic research (Kusenbach 2003). As a result, the case is an attempt to assemble and relay the perspectives, history, values, and lived experiences of the indigenous villagers into an intricate, though readable, text; along the lines of, and almost forming, a thick description<sup>3</sup> in Clifford Geertz’ anthropological sense (1973). Therefore, as customary, the author does not cite individual interviews and only occasionally brings in external references for elucidation or corroboration of larger matters of fact and context. Much of the information about the apiary itself is based on these interviews as well and must be read accordingly.

### 3. The Foundation of an Islamic Apiary

*Taddaret Inzerki* (the home of Inzerki) is said to be the oldest and largest traditional apiary (place where honey beehives are kept/honey production takes place) in the world. It was first constructed in 1520 using wood, rock, and adobe, i.e. a traditional building material made by mixing earth, water, straw and/or manure (Afriyad 2013). The story of the apiary begins with a man from the village of Inzerki who had some experience and a keen interest in beekeeping, wanting to seek the *baraka* (divine blessings) and counsel of a regionally esteemed *Shaykh*<sup>4</sup> in the matter.

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<sup>3</sup> Geertz formulated the ethnographic concept of ‘thick description’ through extensive fieldwork in the Islamic world, in Indonesia and, notably, Morocco (see Geertz 1971).

<sup>4</sup> A *Shaykh* (plural: *Shuyūkh*) in this context, and others, is a person who both masters (in terms of education and scholarship) and embodies (in terms of practice and teaching) the Islamic sciences.

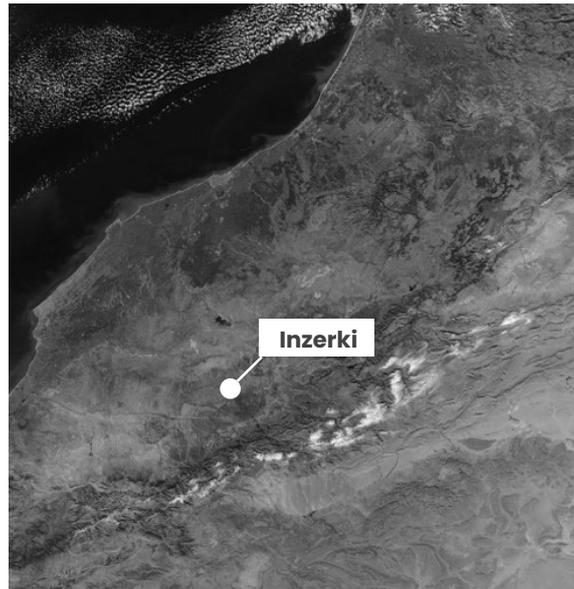


Figure 1: approximate location of Inzerki (original map source: NASA Visible Earth)

*The Shaykh*, Sidi Muhammad Bin Alhussein, led a local branch of the Nasiri *Zāwiya* in the remote and difficult-to-access mountain village of Tafilalt, which is 20 km from Inzerki by bird’s flight. A *zāwiya* (plural: *zawāyā*) can refer to a centuries-old physical place of worship akin to a mosque, but the term also refers to the lived community of people making up an Islamic *collegium* – fundamentally driven by the self-purification and service aspect of Islam known as Sufism – that both frequent the physical place and Islamically design and deliver alternative public-service provision (Chafik and Drechsler 2022). After making the rugged journey to the *zāwiya* from Inzerki, the Nasiri *Shaykh* prayed (to God for assistance) for the man, and advised him on the paramount importance of first seeking out a location where the bees could be at ease and only then proceed with laying just a single hive.



Figure 2: a view of the village of Tafilalt from atop the *zāwiya* (this and all photographs taken by author Sept-Oct 2021)

But one may rightly wonder: Why would the *Shaykh* be so concerned about the welfare of honeybees? More generally, what good advice could a *Shaykh* who had no working knowledge of, or experience in, beekeeping possibly give? And why would *baraka* be relevant or important enough for the man to make the difficult trek to the *Shaykh* in the first place? Briefly answering these questions helps shed light on how the underlying worldview and ambitions of the apiary were (and as this essay will later demonstrate, are still) embedded within Islam.

The Nasiri *Shaykh* understood, as any educated scholar of the Islamic tradition, that although all animals have unequivocal rights in Islam, bees are given a special status. Indeed they are mentioned explicitly and have a namesake chapter in the Qur’ān, in verses that are cited regularly by the beekeepers of Inzerki today when describing how they understand the status and wellbeing of bees:

وَأَوْحَىٰ رَبُّكَ إِلَى النَّحْلِ أَنْ اتَّخِذِي مِنَ الْجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا وَمِنَ الشَّجَرِ وَمِمَّا يَعْرِشُونَ  
ثُمَّ كُلِي مِن كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ فَاسْلُكِي سُبُلَ رَبِّكِ ذُلَالًا يَخْرُجُ مِنْ بَطُونِهَا شَرَابٌ مُّخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَانُهُ  
فِيهِ شِفَاءٌ لِّلنَّاسِ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And your Lord inspired the bees: ‘Make your homes in the mountains, the trees, and in what people construct, then feed from the flower of any fruit you please, and follow the ways your Lord has made easy for you.’ From their bellies comes forth liquid of varying colors, in which there is healing for people. Surely in this is a sign for those who reflect (16:68–69, author’s translation and emphasis).

The logic behind the *Shaykh*’s advice can therefore be understood in three parts:

1. The verses affirm that not only mountains and trees, but any human-made structure can be divinely-sanctioned bee lodging,
2. Bees are divinely encouraged to pursue what is easy for them and in doing so produce a liquid (i.e. honey) that is a remedy for people, and therefore,
3. Surely one clear sign for the pious is that a human-made apiary that sees to the ease and comfort of bees can await the divinely-promised benefit of healing honey.

As for seeking *baraka* from pious individuals such as the Nasiri *Shaykh*, this is a widespread Sufi practice rooted in the belief held by *zawāyā* that blessings do not come from the individual themselves, but rather that this person is known to sincerely strive for the sacred path and, therefore, naturally attract divine blessings and grace. Accordingly, when such an individual gives their approval and prays for the success of something that they are approached for advice on, it is believed that the endeavor will not only be temporarily successful but also carry with it an abundance of *baraka* and protection in the future (in the context of an apiary from, e.g., drought, floods, communal strife, etc).

To return to the story of the apiary, the man returned to Inzerki and – heeding the *Shaykh*’s advice on the wellbeing of the bees – eventually chose the southern facing slope of a nearby valley surrounded by mountains and diverse flora to lay his first hive. This location also provided ample sunlight and protection against the wind. When it was time to harvest the

honey from the single hive, the man decided to once again make the journey to the *zāwiya* so that he could gift the honey to the Nasiri *Shaykh*. The *Shaykh* warmly received the honey and immediately divided it amongst his students at the *zāwiya*, and after making further prayers for Allah to grant *baraka* in the man’s beekeeping efforts going forward, he promised to pay him a visit to Inzerki during the next season’s honey harvest.

The Nasiri *Shaykh* kept his promise and upon seeing and appreciating the location that the man chose to lay his hive, he suggested that the beekeeper build a structure that could house multiple stationary hives. The man was grateful to oblige the *Shaykh*’s suggestion and proceeded to build a small adobe hut for his hives, along with the help of the other villagers. After having learned the story of the Nasiri *Shaykh*’s prayers and the man’s visit to the *zāwiya* in Tafilalt to gift the honey, the villagers of Inzerki were eager to construct their own huts so that they too could take part in the blessed enterprise.



Figure 3: *Taddaret Inzerki*

Thus was born both the apiary of *Taddaret Inzerki* and the tradition of an annual festival whereby the villagers of Inzerki gift the first honey harvest of the year to the Nasiri *Zāwiya* of Sidi Muhammad in Tafilalt – whose reputation of feeding students honey is well known in the region to this day. In fact, the annual honey-gifting festival was discontinued only in 1980, when a series of annual droughts rendered the apiary nearly inoperative. However, in the last decade, both *zāwiya* and apiary have seen a parallel rejuvenation and concerted effort in restoring their institutional missions. For the former, this is running what is known as a *madrassa nizamiya* (Islamic school), where students live and study (named after the educational system established by the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Seljuk statesman and scholar Nizam al-Mulk), and for the latter, this is implementing traditional Islamic beekeeping and honey production (Ait Bounsar 2020). The leadership of both institutions remain in constant contact, are on good terms, and speak sentimentally about the prospect of re-establishing the honey gifting ritual. Additionally, the apiary leadership have plans of relaunching an annual festival to celebrate at least one of the various seasonal honey harvests.



Figure 4: traditional home in Inzerki

Another regional branch of the Nasiri *Zāwiya*, known as Sidi Abdullah Ou Said, also visits Inzerki on an annual basis for a different festival. In late summer, the leadership of the *zāwiya* arrive to Inzerki and throw salt on the villagers’ houses so as to protect them from scorpions, spiders, snakes, etc. They also do a public reading of Qur’ān and prayer for the apiary and larger agricultural activities of the village to be fruitful and protected from drought, harmful insects, wild boars, etc. The villagers have long believed that there is a tangible difference (i.e. more blessings and protection) before and after the salt-throwing and prayers take place, and therefore gift the *zāwiya* leadership a portion of their summer harvest: the crops and trees in the valley apart from the honey, which is out of season at that time.

The intimate association of the villagers of Inzerki, and their *collegium*, with the Nasiri-affiliated *zawāya* and their beliefs and practices is indicative of the centrally embedded role of Islam in their identity and worldview. This was not only the case hundreds of years ago, but up to the present day – a topic we now turn to in the next section.

#### **4. Rules of the (Islamic) Commons & Economic Empowerment**

Located in the mostly rural Sous region of Morocco, the namesake village of Inzerki today has an Amazigh (indigenous people of north and west Africa) population of around 250, with unreliable access to grid electricity and water, and no access to a paved road. Unsurprisingly for such a remote place, the apiary serves as the sole economic opportunity for most of the residents of Inzerki. More broadly, the indigenous population of the village has experienced genuine and continuous autonomy over their affairs since at least the founding of the apiary, which predates the establishment of the currently ruling Alawite monarchy (the oldest of the Arab world) by over a century. Through the collaborative support of the Moroccan government, the UN Environment Program, the German BMUV, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the apiary today is recognized for its cultural and ecological value as an Indigenous and Community Conserved Area or ICCA (see also Figure 5).



Figure 5: infographic at the foothills of the apiary

Functionally, Taddaret Inzerki is structured so that each family in the village has a set allocation of huts in the apiary where they (or any person they choose to allow) can lay their bee hives, harvest honey during one of the various times of year (depending on the nectar season), and consume and/or sell it (although in reality it is mostly small children who focus on the former). The collective apiary contains approximately 150 huts, with each hut containing 4 levels and the capacity to hold 15–20 traditional hives, with the population of honey bees having access to a diverse range of flowers for nectar: Acacia, Date Palm, Carob, Juniper, Lavender, Oregano, Prickly Pear, Thyme, and – exclusively to the region – Argan.

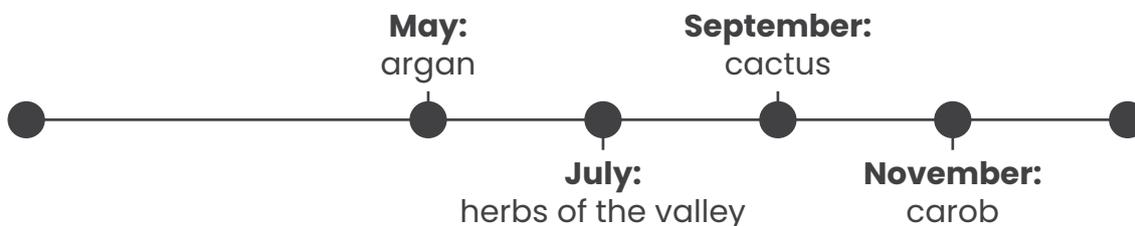


Figure 6: annual Honey Harvests of Taddaret Inzerki

The apiary does not charge fees for laying hives, nor does it take commissions on the honey produced, but it is instead run as a community-led natural resource commons – following the general principles empirically observed in similar traditional institutions elsewhere (Cox et al. 2010). However, a distinctive set of ‘rules for the commons’ have remained intact in Inzerki for more than half a millennium, not in written form, but passed down for generations both orally and embodied in practice:

**General Rules**

- Only traditional cylindrical hives are allowed to be used at the apiary.
- One is free to set down hives in their own huts, or in other huts if given explicit permission to do so by the hut owners.

- It is forbidden to set down hives outside of the known nectar/bee foraging seasons.

### **Beekeeper Rules**

- Pre-conditions for a person harvesting the honey include:
  - They must be an upright person (be deemed to have good character) by Islamic standards.
  - They must not have any outstanding conflicts with community members.
- During the time of harvest, the person harvesting must:
  - Invoke the name of God (say '*bismillah*', i.e. in the name of Allah) before beginning.
  - Be dressed in white because it both keeps the bees calm and represents purity in Islam.
  - Be in a state of ritual purity as if one is about to pray, which means performing Islamic ablution (i.e. *wudu*) beforehand.

### **Respectful Etiquette Rules (and Expectations)**

- One is expected to give a portion of the first honey harvest of every season to the apiary guardian, which serves as his salary.
- One is expected to give honey or extra space to lay hives to community members if asked, just as reciprocity is an honored social norm.
- When harvesting, one is expected to:
  - Harvest only one hive at a time.
  - Only harvest between the third and fourth prayers of the day (which corresponds to the few hours leading up to sunset) since that is when the bees are believed to be calmest.
  - Not harvest too many hives or harvest outside of that time period.
  - Minimize disturbance to bees from the hive at hand and neighboring hives.

Categorically, these rules safeguard either 1) the wellbeing of the bees, 2) the rights of apiary colleagues, and/or 3) the Islamically sound status of beekeepers. The villagers believe that if they fail to uphold even one of these three imperatives, the *baraka* present within their apiary, and perhaps the apiary itself, would certainly fade away (along with their livelihoods). Because these prioritizations are all consciously and scrupulously rooted in Islam, *Taddaret Inzerki* forms a real-world conception of an Islamic indigenous cooperative.

This point becomes clear when examining even the first rule of the apiary: a ban on any other type of hives apart from the local traditional ones, and it exists for two reasons. First, by experience, the beekeepers of Inzerki find it significantly more challenging to work with bees residing in modern hives (which are square shaped, i.e. a lidded box) because they are more quickly distressed and agitated as opposed to the traditional cylindrical ones, where they find the bees to be calm and composed. Second, and what the beekeepers see as directly related, the quality and taste of the honey from traditional hives is believed to be fundamentally

better than that of boxes.<sup>5</sup> Notably, box hives a decade ago used to sell for ~€150 each and traditional ones for the equivalent of only a few Euros. Today, however, the Moroccan honey market is undergoing shifting consumer preferences towards the local and artisanal, e.g. most people prefer to (and indeed do) purchase honey straight from beekeepers, the honey’s floral origin and flavor being the two most important characteristics (Khaoula et al. 2019). Accordingly, box hives now sell for ~€100 and traditional ones for a minimum of €200.



Figure 7: bees of Inzerki (left) and a traditional cylindrical hive (right)

The ban persists despite the fact that the beekeepers are fully aware of two significant advantages that come with utilizing box-based hives: an individual box can produce up to 40 kg of honey annually (and contains 60k bees), whereas a traditional cylindrical hive averages just 10 kg (and contains up to 30k bees); boxes can be stacked one on top of the other and are therefore easily transportable, whether along the supply chain or for the bees to have access to different nectars. The beekeepers of Inzerki made it clear that an institutional goal of their apiary is to specifically not compete at scale, i.e. produce the most amount of honey possible. Instead, they seek to preserve the reputation of *Taddaret Inzerki*, dating back to its genesis, namely, that beekeeping is a sacred craft in which the wellbeing of bees is regarded as paramount and, in doing so, ultimately produces high-quality, healing honey that is also believed to have *baraka*.

The apiary also does not practice any selective breeding of queen bees. Because the villagers regard bees as sacred, they believe it would be invasive and inappropriate to interfere with their reproductive process. Moreover, they believe in an almost Darwinian sense that if they let (Allah’s) nature run its course, the healthy and hearty queen bees and their offspring will be the ones to survive and flourish, and therefore the apiary will be resilient against the elements and pathogens.

Another salient example of the Islamic nature of the commons in Inzerki is the honey harvest. Work begins only when sunset draws near, since that is when the beekeepers find the bees to be most tranquil, and honey is delicately extracted from a single hive at a time up to a maximum of only 5-7 hives per day. This slow and almost meditative process is deliberate so as to minimize disturbance to the bees from the hive at hand as well as nearby hives. When first approaching a hive, beekeepers use a small amount of smoke produced from burning a mix of dried cow manure and the leaves of olive trees to calm the bees and make sure the beekeeper does not startle them. Throughout, a mix of crushed onions and water

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<sup>5</sup> The difference in quality between the two is also attributed to the traditional way of harvesting the honey, which uses a clay pot slow-drip technique that inevitably includes bits of the pollen with the honey.

is immediately sprayed on the bits of honey that inevitably fall during the process of honey extraction, so that the nearby bees do not violently swarm on the honey (a process locally known as *timingit*, Tamazight for ‘the assault of the bees’), which would otherwise occur and potentially agitate and attract thousands of bees. After extraction but before the traditional hive is used again, it is sterilized and purified by burning incense. The above practices are indicative of the profound respect the beekeepers of Inzerki have for both the bees and their traditional craft of beekeeping.



Figure 8: levels of the apiary with rows of terraced huts

### ***The Economics of the Indigenous Cooperative***

In terms of the livelihood of the beekeepers, those that were interviewed were unanimously aligned on the perspective that the apiary allows them the economic means to remain in Inzerki and avoid emigration. This is especially so considering that the only other potential source of income in the valley, other agricultural produce, is insufficient and would restrict or even damage the ecosystem of the bees – something they regarded as an entirely unacceptable outcome. At the time of writing, a single traditional hive at the apiary will produce, as was already stated, around 10 kg of honey, which sells for an average of 300 dirhams per kilogram (roughly €30), meaning that if a villager lays 20 hives annually (a very feasible amount), they can expect around €6,000 of annual income – which they are manifestly grateful for. By way of context, €2,900 and €8,700 are respectively the minimum annual wage and average public-sector annual wage in Morocco (Eliason 2019). The prevailing view is that although there are some issues where central-government (or other external) help is welcomed, which will be discussed below, the villagers are content living self-sufficiently through their indigenous cooperative.

It is therefore understandable why the perseverance and success of the apiary is regarded as

a vital part of their livelihood and even their overall identity. In fact, the villagers believe in the material and immaterial conservation and rejuvenation of their common natural resource that is the apiary. This explains why *Taddaret Inzerki* takes a strictly ‘B2C’ approach to the sale of its honey: by forgoing any intermediaries and selling directly to customers, the beekeepers feel that they can avoid any potential counterfeiting or foul play (e.g. mixing with other honey, dilution with sugar or syrups, etc.) and subsequently preserve the reputation of quality that their apiary is known for. Logistically, this requires the beekeepers to make, at minimum, a 15 km trek to the nearest paved road, where they link up with truck drivers heading towards particular cities in Morocco, and arrange delivery with individual customers mostly through social media.

The perseverance and success of the apiary will, on rare occasion, even prompt the villagers to seek external assistance. A notable example was their desire to address what they saw as an insufficient number of functioning boreholes and solar panels at the apiary. This occurred in the backdrop of the government’s decade-long Green Morocco Plan launched in 2008, with one of its core objectives being the development of local (rural) products, and eventually supported 720 domestic cooperatives (Agency for Agricultural Development 2022), including *Taddaret Inzerki*. The villagers wanted to be included in the initiative because they recognized that they were unequipped in terms of know-how and capital regarding the drilling of boreholes and the installation and maintenance of solar panels, which offered a low-impact (i.e. green) route to upgrading the water and energy infrastructure of the apiary. As such, they took the initiative to register *Taddaret Inzerki* as an official cooperative at their local council – a necessary step to receive support via the Green Morocco Plan. The villagers subsequently received funding and technical support from the Moroccan government (and in close collaboration, international NGOs), which had years of experience directly or indirectly implementing rural public-works projects utilizing recent, environmentally conscious, technologies.

### ***The Apiary, Recapitulated***

As is evident from the rules of the commons concerning the rights of apiary colleagues and the piety of individuals, the villagers of Inzerki are concerned not only with decorum vis-à-vis the bees, but also with others, as well as with the divine. The apiary is therefore not a strictly vocational association, but rather much more along the lines of an Althusian *collegium* that envelopes and manages social life, i.e. colleagues live and are ruled by it. Indeed, *Taddaret Inzerki* is a source of active character development and refinement, as well as a setter of social norms and customs (beyond beekeeping), regularly through its senior members and occasionally, although principally, through the regional Nasiri *Shuyūkh* and their prayers and guidance during annual festivals or impromptu visits.

The villagers are driven by the belief that upholding proper etiquette means one is being considerate to others and is respecting divine guidelines for human behavior – both of which are considered fundamental parts of being a good Muslim (even outside of the context of the apiary). Otherwise, if one is to remove the necessities of invoking the name of God, performing a ritual wash, and wearing white garments after making up with a neighbor from their Islamic context, it may appear as though the beekeepers have various idiosyncratic practices that are both trivial and rather inefficient to the production of honey. As all of the beekeepers

that were interviewed affirmed, however, these idiosyncratic practices are an inseparable and sacrosanct part of their indigenous craft of Islamic beekeeping. The status of Islam in *Taddaret Inzerki* is therefore as uncompromisingly paramount and central today as it was when the Nasiri *Shaykh* Sidi Muhammad gave his counsel and *baraka* five centuries ago.

## 5. Discussion: The Triple Benefit

“The final cause of politics is the enjoyment of a comfortable, useful, and happy life, and of the common welfare – that we may live with piety and honour a peaceful and quiet life, that ... true piety toward God and justice among the citizens may prevail at home” (Althusius 1995, 24).

The results of the ethnographic data collected suggest that the scope of decision-making power and responsibility devolved to *Taddaret Inzerki* is comprehensive, and that the villagers utilize this continued autonomy to run a centuries-old indigenous cooperative based on their local Islamic tradition. These findings indicate, preliminarily, that the devolution policy results in a triple-benefit: for the Moroccan state who implements it, the villagers who act upon it, and the globe who can learn from it.

### **The Moroccan State**

Apart from its inherent remoteness, the case illustrated that the Inzerki villagers and their apiary proved to be a strategically well-suited candidate for the Moroccan state’s devolution policy for two main reasons, both of which are of significant benefit. The first reason is the healthy interplay of local autonomy and state allegiance exhibited by *Taddaret Inzerki*, which is closely related to the nuances between devolution (which is focused on scale) and subsidiarity (which is focused on both scale and competence). To clarify, it was only because of the comprehensive transfer of responsibility and decision-making power over their own affairs (i.e. devolution) that the villagers were able to recognize the limits of their knowledge and expertise (e.g. in the case of upgrading water and energy infrastructure), and consciously turn to the state for support in a particular area that it has higher competency in (i.e. subsidiarity), which subsequently cements state legitimacy and authority. The case of *Taddaret Inzerki* suggests that the dynamic of a genuinely autonomous *collegium* that decides when, what, and how state support is appropriate – and by doing so implicitly recognizes the higher powers of the realm – is a positive one not only in Althusian, but also in Islamic terms.

The second reason as to why the apiary is a sensible choice for continued devolution relates to the manifest loyalty of the villagers to the head of the realm (in the Moroccan context: the king) as a principle of belief cultivated by the Nasiri *Zāwiya*. To be clear, all *zawāyā* in Morocco not only recognize the Alawite monarchy as legitimate, but ceremoniously pledge allegiance (*bay‘a*) to it and make regular public prayers (at least every Friday) for the king to be granted *baraka* (and by extension, the society he rules over; Chafik and Drechsler 2022). This ritualization of what Althusius describes as holding a ‘reverent attitude’ gives the Moroccan monarchy an indispensable amount of sacred soft power that not only legitimizes its rule but garners it support and popularity.

What is particularly noteworthy about the Nasiri *Zāwiya* is that it is one of Morocco’s most

prominent, with hundreds of branches in rural and urban areas and, at the headquarters *zāwiya*, one of the oldest and largest manuscript libraries in the maghreb – that was funded and supported, not coincidentally, by the Moroccan government. The Nasiriya are responsible for some of the most iconic manifestations of Moroccan Islam, e.g. the twice-daily *hizb* (1/60 section of the Qur’ān) group recitation done in every mosque in the country to this day, and Imam al-Dar’ī’s (d. 1674) *Prayer of the Oppressed*, which was recited so frequently and extensively throughout Morocco during the colonial period (adopted even by non-Nasiri *zawāyā*) that it helped inspire resistance to the French occupation (Ar-Radani 2014, 12). The benefit to the Moroccan government of having the allegiance of, and experiencing a ‘reverent attitude’ from, such a beloved *zāwiya* and its members, who are exemplar beekeepers and citizens, is quite evident.

### **The Villagers**

Although the numerous benefits of the devolution policy for the villagers of Inzerki were apparent throughout the case, one can emphasize the four most prominent. First, and most importantly, the villagers have sufficient autonomy to shape, administer, and preserve their centuries-old Islamic apiary as they see fit. Second, through the apiary, the villagers are able to reliably maintain a respectable (both in terms of income and dignity) livelihood in an area (and even country) where such an accomplishment remains elusive for many. Third, the Islamic apiary is literally known as the home (*taddaret*) of Inzerki, which highlights the real sense of shared local identity and overall social structure and harmony that is cultivated through it – positive signs of a functional *collegium*. Fourth, the conservation and enhancement of the local environment surrounding Inzerki, which is something the villagers value immensely in itself and with regards to the quality of their local life. This, of course, makes the villagers of Inzerki one more example in a long tradition of indigenous stewardship of natural resource commons (Gadjil et al. 1993), which brings us to the third, i.e. planetary, benefit.

### **The World**

In a techno-economic age driven by information and communications technology (Perez 2002), one of the *prima facie* more ironic insights revealed by the findings is that by pursuing an age-old local tradition of beekeeping, the apiary provides groundbreaking answers to various global challenges. Take for instance the well-established consumer preferences trend of preferring and even paying a considerable premium for products that are natural, organic, small-scale, artisanal, etc., or the increasing importance of concepts such as animal welfare, ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance), and the triple bottom-line (profit, people, and planet) for businesses globally (for a Morocco-specific analysis, see Lambarraa-Lehnhardt et al. 2021). *Taddaret Inzerki* is not retroactively attempting to fit any of these standards or desired qualities into its practices, nor is the Moroccan government nudging or forcing it to get there through incentives or regulations (or the latest app), but rather, the apiary may already provide general principles – or at the very least perhaps a starting point – of how Islamic beekeeping can all at once generate high-quality honey, economically empower local populations, tread lightly (and even enhance) the environment, and compassionately sustain biodiversity. With regard to the latter in particular, the critical

role of healthy bee populations for ecosystems (and life as such) due to their role as pollinators is difficult to overstate, which makes, in the author's estimation, the successful model of the apiary a *globally* highly relevant and encouraging achievement.

## 6. Further Research

Before proposing directions for future research, the author acknowledges that at least two limitations exist with regards to the study's findings. The first relates to external validity: prior to generalizing or replicating any successes from *Taddaret Inzerki*, it is important to note that it required 1) an extant indigenous cooperative operating at the micro (village) level that is 2) deeply committed to a largely homogenous tradition of Moroccan Islam and 3) a realm (i.e. central state) that is stable and strong enough to trust the process and end result of devolution. It would therefore require further studies in other contexts before even getting close to (Islamic) paradigm-specific, let alone general, best practices. The second limitation concerns the punctuated nature of data collection (amidst the pandemic), even going beyond the usual issues of case studies based on stakeholder interviews within a somewhat immersive approach. Specifically, as the time horizon of the *in situ* ethnographic research was short (two months), the author was unable to observe and interview as many villagers as intended, nor attend the apiary's various festivals and honey-season rituals. However, to the author's knowledge, the present essay is the first contribution on *Taddaret Inzerki* to the English academic literature and, as such, can (hopefully) serve as an informative first take.

That being said, one can identify four broad areas of future research that are potentially fruitful and worth exploring through further empirical cases and theoretical analyses of the apiary itself, and similar institutions in Morocco and beyond. All four areas would require a decolonizing research approach, that is, not simply critiquing colonialism and its legacies (e.g. global Western academic hegemony), but "reimagining and bringing forward Indigenous epistemic approaches, philosophies and methodologies" (Smith 2021, xii).

### 1. Lessons for local devolution

The case of *Taddaret Inzerki* demonstrates that it may be possible to overcome one of the largest stumbling blocks to municipal-level devolution policies: working with what successful institutions are already present (whether indigenous or local) instead of creating new, ultimately unfamiliar, ones based on external principles. To do so, the first step for the state and its partners should be to identify, understand, and value local institutions and *their* principles. After all, "the basic unit of actual living together, the least imagined and most 'real' one, is the community in which one lives, and that is the municipality. To have a say in this community and about that community can easily be called the most basic idea of autonomy at all – today in the globalized world as much as it was already in the Middle Ages" (Drechsler 2013a, 163).

This raises another interesting topic of future study, which is the enduring relevance of Althusius, in particular his concept of the *collegium* in the larger taxonomy of societal institutions, not only for municipal devolution but, more broadly, as the basis for key contemporary concepts such as interactive (Torfing et al. 2012), network (Torfing 2005), collaborative (Ansell 2012),

cooperative (Valentinov 2004), polycentric (Ostrom 2010), and public value (O'Flynn 2021) governance. Carrying on the spirit of decolonizing research, which calls not for a blanket dismissal of Western theory and research, but for taking up and developing relevant parts of it from non-Eurocentric perspectives, values, and purposes (Archibald et al. 2019), *Taddaret Inzerki* demonstrated that Althusius's *collegium* is useful in understanding community-based governance and administration even within the Islamic paradigm. As we have seen, the apiary is much more than a group of professionals: it is an identity-generating cooperative that serves as the vehicle to the 'good life' and constitutes civil society itself for the villagers. Indeed, in a world of "globalization, ... multiculturalism, and migration, the municipality becomes the citizens' genuine home" – which is one of the reasons why municipal autonomy is often seen as problematic or even threatening from the nation state's perspective (Drechsler 2008, 140). Perhaps, then, one remedy to this inherent conflict is to further understand, and if possible extract lessons from, *Taddaret Inzerki* and similar *collegia* that in spite of (arguably, because of) municipal autonomy, maintain a symbiotic, mutually-beneficial relationship with the state. Potential examples of such *collegia* range from the Sienese *contrade* (Drechsler 2006), which are from a Western urban setting, to *pesantren* (Fawaid 2016), which operate in a rural (Islamic) Indonesian context.

Finally, one may argue that centuries of local autonomy are simply a function of Inzerki's remoteness and size, which combine to make it a truly peripheral location from a public administration perspective – in other words, a policy of devolution by apathy. However, the Moroccan government was not apathetic when it chose to actively include Inzerki in its national rural development agenda, grant the apiary cultural and ecological heritage status alongside several international bodies, and respond to the local request for support with upgrading the local water and energy infrastructure. While it is true that the village and its apiary are relatively minor in the broader domestic affairs of Morocco, and may be regarded by many (especially urban) Moroccans as antiquated – this is exactly why the case of *Taddaret Inzerki* is interesting, i.e. that an indigenous cooperative operating quietly and inconspicuously in the periphery for centuries is able to be reliably called upon to address the societal issues and demands of today. Discovering where and how similar institutions exist is surely an important agenda item for future research.

## **2. Observed principles of local-level Islamic Economics**

The findings on *Taddaret Inzerki*, although, again, not sufficient to theorize on Islamic Economics as such, do offer three general principles of a local-level economic structure inherently based on Islam, even if they share commonalities with other traditions. First, an unwavering emphasis on respecting the sanctity of a craft or livelihood. The Inzerki villagers have a strong sense of and live by certain Islamically-informed requirements and limits to their beekeeping activities, which keeps the actual craft intact despite clear economic incentives to change it. Therefore the not-very *homines economici* villagers demonstrate, in a Polanyian sense (1944), that profit is not the natural driving force of society but, rather, is embedded within (and subservient to) the culture, norms, and values of that particular society.

Second, economic livelihood is fundamentally linked to *baraka*. For the villagers, livelihood is believed to be ordained by God (*Ar-Razzāq* or 'The Provider' is one of the names of Allah), and as long as they are seeking to be on His path, the following is believed to be blessed

and continue: forage (various flora) for the bees, water supply (annual rainfall), seasonal harvests of honey, quality (i.e. taste and health benefits) of the honey, income from the honey, harmonious social relations, and the apiary itself. From such a perspective, disregarding bee welfare to maximize output (i.e. honey) or violating any other rule of their commons becomes not only sinful, but irrational, because of the prospect of removing *baraka* from all of the above. In essence, one's livelihood is a function of not only the labor they do, but ensuring that the labor, the nature of it, and its externalities, is divinely sanctioned. Or as Althusius put it: "May the supremely good and great God grant that while we dwell in this social life by his kindness, we may show ourselves pleasing to him and beneficial to our neighbour" (1995, 15).

Third, 'sustainable' is an upshot of (aiming to uphold) Islamic values, not the goal itself. The Inzerki villagers do not base their apiary on the worldview, however correct it may be, that a sustainability agenda is increasingly necessary as a consequence of late industrial capitalism threatening the planet's climate and biodiversity. Rather, the conservation of their natural resource commons in the form of an apiary is based on the worldview of Islamic stewardship – that creation, including nature, is not our possession but Allah's and must therefore be treated as a sacred responsibility. Once again, this is a key point to consider when designing devolution policies (especially in the context of natural resource management): instead of transporting an external, often secular, model of how and why sustainable practices should be achieved, one must first consider local or indigenous models that may ultimately result in sustainable (perhaps even regenerative) outcomes because of the broader set of ontological and theological views underlying them. To advance our understanding of such views within the Islamic context, *maqāsid* (higher objectives/purposes of Islam) is a particularly salient concept (see Auda 2007).

### **3. An Islamic Commons?**

The case illustrated that the way by which *Taddaret Inzerki* is structured and managed can be distilled into a set of rules of the commons, which reflect the villagers' understanding of (public) value. There have been recent, sensible calls for understanding the contextual nature of, and empowering communities to collectively self-determine, value, i.e. "value as a commons" (Kostakis and Pazaitis 2020). One interesting avenue of future research may be to discuss the notion that all value is contextual, that is, to explore whether there are not some paradigm-wide principles that determine value. Regarding a potential Islamic paradigm of the commons, the apiary hints at universal (e.g. wellbeing of bees) and contextual (e.g. whether or not to charge membership or usufruct fees) elements of value as a commons. As a broader starting point, there also exist various notions of service to (and with) community that are rooted in traditional Islamic scholarship, e.g. *khidma* (task or service for another), *amāna* (obligation or trust relating to both the tangible and intangible), and *maslaha* (public interest).

### **4. Understanding the impact of Islamic Beekeeping**

The largest area of potential fruitful research is likely the ecological: how do the practices and perspectives of the beekeepers stand up to our current scientific understanding? Take, for instance, the lack of selective breeding for queen bees. Currently the most common

reason for bee colony failure is poor queens, i.e. those that perish prematurely (within less than a year) instead of after the natural 3–4 year lifespan (Kulhanek et al. 2017). Indeed, the majority of queens in the US are selectively bred by a handful of companies, which “raises concerns about a lack of genetic diversity and the spread of certain diseases” (Amiri et al. 2017). Although none have any scientific training, the beekeepers of Inzerki firmly believe that the phenomenon of poor queens could be avoided if one falls back on local natural breeding of bees and give this advice to any visiting Moroccan, American, or European scientist or beekeeper involved with large-scale commercial industry. The push for this local-level type production of queens, known as ‘microbreeding’, is something that is indeed underway globally, but remains underexplored in the literature (Amiri et al. 2017), and therefore, it remains to be seen whether Inzerki’s beekeepers are indeed correct.

Apart from diseases, another topic where we have more questions than answers relates to the robustness of Inzerki’s bees vis-à-vis the elements. In the period of autumn to winter of 2021–22, Moroccan honey production saw a significant downtick due to the worst national drought in forty years, with many beekeepers across the country reporting failure of all their colonies and the Moroccan government responding with over €12 million in aid (*Le Monde* 2022). However *Taddaret Inzerki*, despite losing several hives over this period, is still in operation and expects healthy spring and early summer harvests. What accounts for the discrepancy? Could it be that the practices of the apiary have a casual effect on colony survival and overall health, and if so, which ones? One of the factors may be something as simple as utilizing only cylindrical hives. As we now know from modern apiology, the language of bees is through various forms of dance, all of which share a circular element (von Frisch 1993). Perhaps then, the communication of bees (and by extension their temperament and health) in box hives is suboptimal?

Despite these promising research questions, one important caveat is that there are certain aspects of Islamic beekeeping in Inzerki that are not amenable to investigation, but are instead sacred matters (pertaining to values and faith). For instance, although melittologists today can describe the intricate details of how the stinger’s detachment post-sting results in the honeybee dying from what is effectively an abdominal wound (for a popular science account, see Hanson 2018), the head beekeeper pointed out that the realm of ‘why’ is not readily answerable by the scientific method. He did put forth an Islamic explanation regarding why (of the bees that are capable of stinging) honeybees are the only type of bee to die after stinging: “if a bee could sting a person and simply move on and return to the routines of honey production, that honey would surely be contaminated with impurities and diseases – thus not being a source of healing”, referring back to the *supra* Qur’anic verses on honey bees. This anecdote reminds one of the inextricable knowledge–practice–belief structure often found in indigenous communities stewarding their local ecological systems and biodiversity (Gadgil et al. 1993) – and moreover, for the sake of both epistemic decolonization and successful natural resource management, the necessity of respecting and valuing the sacred elements within it.

## 7. Conclusion

Through *Taddaret Inzerki*, this essay investigated a case of devolution policy vis-à-vis an indigenous cooperative in the area of natural resource management. What is noteworthy

about the institutional priorities and practices of the apiary (i.e. the rules of their commons) which are Islamically based, is that there are built-in components that shape not only all aspects of the craft of beekeeping, but society itself in the small village of Inzerki. These findings demonstrate that this particular devolution policy is 1) insightful because it is actually successful and it emerged from the underexplored Islamic context, 2) beneficial to local, national, and global interests, and 3) (hopefully) encouraging as a starting point for a diverse set of future research themes and questions in public administration and beyond.

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**Salah Chafik** is a Senior Research Fellow at UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose and a Visiting Researcher at TalTech Ragnar Nurkse Department of Governance and Innovation. His research interests include Governance, Economics, and the commons, specifically in the Islamic context.