
The Maghreb, an Imaginary Community

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The approach to what could be called, with all due precautions, “The Maghreb Fact”, “The Conscience”, “The Identity”, if not “The Maghreb Unity”, or simply anything relevant to Pan-Maghrebi communitarianism, deserves full consideration, mainly with the timely opportunity offered by this symposium on the “Communities Imagined in the Mediterranean Space”¹. As we have been drawing largely on the work, conducted not only by Benedict Anderson but many others as well, about the “National Question”, we wish to express our grateful thanks to all, and apologies for not being able to cite² each and every one in this modest contribution.

For the sake of exposure, we will proceed with a few remarks and reminders which may lead us to conclusions (always provisional, of course), or even to possibly random suggestions, and above all to queries.

The Maghreb as a Community Imagined and Representation: the Question of Names and Their Arbitrariness

The Maghreb is unquestionably a construction based on a number of strata and features left by history. These features intertwine with socio-anthropological characteristics and policies that have contributed to its formation, with an overlay of various names that are necessarily marked (if we were to refer to philologists, semioticians, etc.). Other sociolinguists have also considered the arbitrary nature of the sign

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² As to the Anglo-Saxons, we shall cite here, along with Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm.

(and therefore the name), and have identified designations relevant to diverse realities and representations. However, they have avoided the teleological and essentialist approach, and have instead found that their conclusions have become increasingly aligned with prevailing conceptions.

The very term “Maghreb” was initially associated with the Islamic penetration, or “*futuhât*,” which positioned it as a Muslim West, encompassing, at times, regions such as Andalusia, Malta, and Sicily. Prior to this, at the end of the 19th century and mainly at the beginning of the 20th century, the region was assimilated into the Arab Maghreb, in relation to the Arab Mashriq. This is a geopolitical zone that should not be confused with the Islamic Mashriq or Muslim East, which was linked to the “*futuhât*” or trade activity in the depths of the Asian continent (i.e., mainly in areas where Arabic does not currently have the status of a “vernacular” language, let alone a “national” language).

By the coincidence of history, the word “Maghreb” has crossed the geographical era where the ancestral language was Berber or Tamazight, before being rivaled and even largely overtaken by the usage of Arabic. This is what would correspond to the ancient Libya (or Lebou of Hérodote), to Roman Africa (including Africa, Numidia and the Mauritanias), Berberia or the Barbaric States of the modern (or pre-colonial) era and to the North Africa of the contemporary colonial era, and ultimate misfortune, the neologism of “Tamazgha” occasionally used today.

It should also be noted that today the word “Maghreb” has a polysemic character since it is commonly used in Arabic (Maghrib) precisely to designate only one of its components, the former *Maghreb al Aqçâ* (Maghreb or extreme West that corresponds to a large extent to present-day Morocco)³. Our concern in this paper is obviously with the sense of the word “Maghreb” in its traditional meaning (sometimes called “Al-Maghrîb Al-Kabîr” in Arabic or “Grand Maghreb” to distinguish it from a reference to Morocco alone). Today it extends from the Mediterranean to the North, to the borders of Sub-Saharan Africa, and notably includes the National States of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania, pending the settlement of the Western Sahara issue. Occupied until 1975 by Spain, then shared between Mauritania and Morocco, before being fully annexed by Morocco, the Western

³ The Maghreb was divided at certain points in its history into “*Al-Maghrîb- Al-Adnâ*” (Close Maghreb roughly corresponding to “Libya” and “*Ifriqiâ*” or today’s “Tunisia”), “*Al-Maghrîb Al-Awsât*” (median central Maghreb) and “*Al-Maghrîb Al-Aqçâ*” (or Maghreb extreme, first located in what would correspond to present day Morocco).

Sahara is still a matter for negotiations under the aegis of the United Nations (UN).

The Maghreb: From Anthropological Unity to the Problem of Political Unity

The Maghreb has nevertheless constituted a political unit, apart from attempts to integrate it into larger and eccentric entities, such as the Roman Empire in antiquity, the Muslim Empires of the Umayyad and Abbasid East at the beginning of the medieval era, as well as from the 16th century of the Ottoman Empire (which extended to the western borders of present-day Algeria) or the phase of European colonization (especially with France from 1830 for Algeria then Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania, but also for certain regions, Spain or Italy). Things could have been worked out since the Antiquity around the cities founded by the Phoenicians (Carthage notably from the 9th century BC) or from certain Berber kingdoms like Numidia under Massinissa (from the 2nd to the 1st century BC) and much later with the *Fatimid* in the tenth century, the *Almoravids* in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the *Almohads* in the XII-XIII centuries.

Ibn Toumert had in fact succeeded, with the assistance of the *Masmudas* from the High Atlas, in joining other tribes such as the *Koumias of Traras* mobilized by Abdelmoumen Ibn Ali, to make the Almohad Empire a mighty power bringing together the bulk of the Maghreb, from the Atlantic to the borders of present-day Libya and the Mediterranean (even as far as Spain) into the Sahara for about a century (from the 12th to the 13th century). If the historical circumstances had been a favourable moment for their state construction, that construction must have finally collapsed, giving way to entities with the shifting borders that would become the anticipated boundaries of the Maghreb States⁴ contemporary to us. These imperial ambitions, particularly those coming from the Almoravids and the Almohads between the 11th and the 13th century, coincided with the arrival and installation in the Maghreb of *Hilalian* waves from the East in the 11th century (Banû Hilal, Banû Sulaym, Banû Maâqal...) as well as with the affirmation of the Malekite rite broadcast from Kairuan since the 9th century.

This is probably the reason why the period is often considered as the period which could have witnessed the emergence of a classical Maghreb marked by political unity, which would be achieved through the blending of the main features that characterize it now: use of the traditional Berber

⁴ Examples include the Hafçide, Zyanide and Merinide States whose respective capitals were Tunis, Tlemcen and Fez.

and Arabic dialects, and the triumphant dominance of the *Mālikī*, which benefited from the withdrawals or disappearance of other rites assimilated to heterodoxy by the powerful (those referred to as “*kharéjites*”, especially the *Ibadism* and to a lesser extent the *Çofrisme*, as well as the various affiliations to *Shi'ism*, notably with the *Idrissides* and Fatimids), as well as the extinction of the last pockets of Christianity whose presence here dates back to Roman Antiquity. In fact, if the Maghreb can be characterized by a certain anthropological unity coupled with obvious historical interactions and interferences, the political unity, achieved in an endogenous or self-centred manner, was but short-lived with regard to history. There have certainly been longer periods of domination led by off-centred entities, not without the imperial capitals thinking of ensuring at least the administrative unity of the region that will be governed according to varied statutes conferring the different divisions/mappings and modes of domination during the Roman, Ottoman and French epochs⁵. Similarly, from the Ancient Times to this day, the diverse and competing (if not rival) indigenous state bodies, which had been constituted, have spanned overall, with regard to history, a much longer period of time than the short-lived Empires known as the Fatimid (during its Maghrebi era in the 10th century) or the Almoravid or even the Almohad (less than a century each).

The Maghreb from Yesterday to Today: Between Regional and Global Dynamics

Those Maghrebi States, which have been constituted throughout history, by the interaction of “global” dynamics (let us say more regional or even more “worldwide dynamic”) to borrow the concept from Maxime Rodinson, were naturally drawing the conditions of their emergence from established socio-historical and anthropological contexts. The expression, that has long been dominant, is undoubtedly to be sought in the process described and theorized by Abderrahmane Ibn Khaldun which, at first sight, was part of the local and the “endogenous”. The phenomenon of *Açabiyyâh* is in fact intimately linked to social bodies characterized by the pervasive presence of the tribal organization and forms of agnatic and lineal solidarity. In times of crisis and decline of the Established States (States-cities, Emirates or Empires, depending on the context), the most powerful tribal groups (sometimes organized into large

⁵ We know the interest of the Salafist doctrine in this Almohad period considered as the classical era par excellence in the Maghreb, and whose decline would begin among thinkers like Malek Bennabi or Allal El Fassi, with the post-Almohad period.

confederations) and therefore the tightest Aḩabiyyâh, offer, so to speak, an alternative solution, thus ensuring the continuity that will bring to power a new dynasty, issued from its own aristocracy. However, the phenomenon tends to enter a more global dynamic for, when this Aḩabiyyâh need to voice the truth, it request the *Dâawa* or a missionary action, (ideological ferment linked to the religious message), and a solid economic foundation to help with the leverage of the resources needed for the management of a successful enterprise. In the Middle Ages, Islam was an of inspiration for the ideological ferment through its various obedience (essentially drawn from “Kharijism”, “Shi’ism” or “Sunnism” according to the pattern of “the Muhammedan action” proposed by Georges Labica), and the economic resources often collected through the control of the trade channels that flooded the region, namely the trans-Saharan trade (Gold trade in the first place, as it has been established by contemporary studies). The convergence of these factors and their potential as well as the circumstances will in fact determine the results of the operation, the importance of the new state training and the power of the new dynasty (which may find itself at the head of a local emirate or of larger units with an imperial vocation). Without completely waning, the phenomenon thus described would lose some of its magnitude at the end of the modern era, probably and mainly because of a dwindling Trans-Saharan trade induced by the scarcity of African Gold, and even more certainly by a thriving Europe which has been able, since the 15th century, to divert through the shipping routes, the caravan trails, turning the Muslim World into its pivotal crossroads⁶. The rise of Europe will be preceded and accompanied by such phenomena of expansion as the Crusades, the ending of the Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula, then the strong pressure announcing the worldwide colonial expansion, mostly across the Maghreb coasts. Despite the resistance led under the hegemony of the Ottomans in the Mediterranean sphere and across most of the Maghreb.

The vibrant presence of the Saadians in Morocco and their expanding brotherhood network, which spans the Muslim world and is especially prevalent in the Maghreb, has been highlighted by Jacques Berque and the role of scholars. Furthermore, there is a growing phenomenon in the Maghreb of people heading towards the sea, which is becoming an alternative to the caravan trade.

⁶ Among these major caravan routes are those leading to the Middle East and connecting this area to China (via Central Asia) in terms of silk, to India and the Indian Ocean in terms of spices, and of course those connecting Sub-Saharan Africa in the Maghreb, in terms of gold mainly.

In 1830, the French penetrate Algerian territory, then Tunisia in 1881, before concluding with the Spaniards the sharing of Morocco in the wake of the proclamation of the protectorates in 1912. The resistance carried out from the cities, mainly from the tribal and brotherhood network, will eventually weaken before dying out at the end of the 19th century, in Algeria, and a little later in the other Maghreb regions subjected to a more recent colonization. In the meantime, society will be completely deconstructed by the penetration of colonial capitalism, giving rise to new categories that will soon be voiced out through National movements and Nationalism.

Mashreq-Maghreb-Territorial States: on the Debate Surrounding the Existence of an Arab Nation

The problem now is not so much about whether the Maghreb was an imagined community, which goes without saying⁷, as about it being able to apply-as a whole- for the title of Nation. Would the answer be “yes”, why then did it not evolve as a National State spanning the whole region?

If, from ancient times, it has been characterized by a certain linguistic unity, let's say ethnico-religious, and sometimes dynastic and political, which gives it a kind of “historical depth” (Anouar Abdelmalek speaking of Egypt), for instance characteristics likely to refer to a “popular proto-nationalism” (Eric Hobsbawn), it is challenging to speak of “nation” that is still in the agrarian and pre-capitalist phase⁸. This is a consensus among scholars such as Gellner, Hobsbawn, Anderson, and others. This phase is applicable to each country in the region on a standalone basis.

At first sight, things are not very different if we try to scale to the entire Arab World with the persistent question of the existence of an Arab nation that Samir Amin saw emerging as early as the Middle Ages with the rise of a class of merchant warriors. But isn't it only an a posteriori reconstruction linked to the deployment of the Arab nationalism at the dawn of the 20th century (Young Arabs, Baâth, Nasserism...), which will give birth to the appellations: Arab Mashreq and Arab Maghreb? In any

⁷ Anderson B. could note “to tell the truth, beyond the major villages where ‘face to face’ is the rule (and yet...) there is but imagined community. The communities are distinguished, not by their falsehood or authenticity, but by the style in which they are imagined”, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

⁸ The approaches of Gellner, Hobsbawn, Anderson and others agree on this point and join the Marxist approach, which links the emergence of the nation, among others, to the existence of an industrial and merchant bourgeoisie.

case, the question of the existence of a nation, or simply Arab nationalism, seems to have been taken seriously, the only concern being about its relation to the truly existing Nation-States.

It was thus possible to put forward an explanation of the phenomenon by proposing the existence of a “two-tier” or “double deck” nation (Maxime Rodinson, Anouar Abdelmalek). Another question remains to be asked: How come there has been no evolution towards the emergence of a pan-Arab State and how could all the attempts at unification, stipulated by some or initiated by others, not succeed? How could the persistence of territorial states -dating back to colonial boundaries, or even having sometimes pre-existed them under various constructions- be explained? The Maghreb, which is our main concern in this paper, makes a good case in point. Does this not refer to superposed or intertwined imaginaries, and bearers at the same time of territorial nationalisms, pan Arabism, and such other variations as the one in favour of the Maghreb Unity? However, we can see that, scaled to the macro level, the concern with the Arab Unity seems to have long marginalized the issue of the Maghreb Unity.

Anyway, despite its lethargy, the Arab States League did have, at some moments in its existence, some visibility, undoubtedly invigorated not only by the Middle East conflicts and the Palestinian Question, but by the activism of political trends such as *Baath* or *Nasserism* as well. Those movements did not really have to speak of equivalents in the Maghreb where the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) is not even in a position to operate its own statutory bodies.

At the turn of the century, the epistolary turmoil conducted by the Bach Hamba brothers' committee, the foundation of *l'Etoile Nord – Africaine* (ENA, French for North African Star) in Paris 1926, or the activism of the last 1940s and 1950s of the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb presided over by Abdelkrim Al-Khattabi in Cairo, along with the tentative creation of a Maghreb Liberation Army in 1955-1956 were but aborted initiatives meant to picture an imaginary, politically united North Africa.

Despite the marks of solidarity, the fights will continue mostly in separate ways, since the Resistance led in Algeria by Emir Abdelkader in the first half of the 19th century, until the Moroccan Rif uprising with Abdelkrim from 1921 to 1926, and the wars of liberation expected to lead to the national independences.

Unity and Diversity: About Identity Repositories, Diversity Proto-Nationalisms, and National Histories

These pan-Maghrebi ambitions may well have failed, they nevertheless express attempts, which might have been successful under other circumstances. After all there are several objectively favourable factors, such as the inherited identity references that brought together the different “proto-nationalisms” (interpretations of the Berber and Arab languages, Islam, shared memory...), the territorial contiguity, and an interfering history, if not common from the most remote times until the confrontation with the contemporary colonization. However, history cannot be constructed in reverse, with “ifs” and “maybes”; for, as it may not appear, the Maghreb does not constitute a completely homogeneous whole socially because it is compartmentalized between populations living in the plains and mountains, steppes and desert, city and countryside, as well as different social structures. Without falling into geographical determinism, centripetal tendencies must constantly be confronted with others more centrifugal. This has certainly favoured the existence of communities and then multiple state formations, to the extent that even during the periods of integration into larger imperial entities, there never was any question of establishing a centralized and uniform administration. The French colonization, even after settling with the Spanish in Morocco, has for the most part and for the regions of North Africa it had first occupied, kept the divisions issued from the collapse of the Almohad empire (in the 13th century), in approximately the same conditions established before it, throughout the Ottoman Regencies of the Ottoman Empire and Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, and the Moroccan Kingdom. Going further back into ancient history, had not the Arab geographers, as we have already pointed out, made a distinction between the Maghrîb Al-Adna, Maghrîb Al-Awsat, and Maghrîb Al-Aqçâ, and as from the Berber and Roman antiquity has no distinction been made between the territory of Carthage, the Numid Kingdoms and the Mauritania?

But no need to go thus far because the nation is, let us repeat it, a phenomenon linked to the modern world and whether the nationalists exploit the past, they do so naturally in a selective and even mythical manner, letting their imagination soar according to ambitions, fantasies and circumstances. Their approaches often teleological, and a-temporal, frequently relayed in the “national” history manuals and other breviaries, must be the object of criticism. However, we will not dwell upon it here.

Has the Maghreb Constituted a Nation? About the Language of Printing and Capitalism

Without losing sight of the “idealistic” or “subjective” approaches of the Nation (Fichte, Renan) and “materialists” or “objectivists (Marxism in its different variations)⁹, some factors must have contributed, according to Benedict Anderson, to the making of the National Imaginary. Two of them that seem to him decisive will retain briefly our attention: the existence of a vernacular language and Capitalism, their effects being of course combined. China and Korea, for example, have experienced printing long before its advent in Europe (in the 15th century) but this did not cause the emergence of a national feeling in these countries.

The Maghreb has experienced these two factors, more or less simultaneously, but in general and mainly with the introduction of the colonial order, that is to say from the 19th century. What effects did it have on the Maghreb?

1) Colonial capitalism, we will not expand on it, has its own specificities. If it breaks down pre-existing social formation, its effects are not quite the same as in Europe, since it develops little of local industries and does not allow a significant circulation of employees, goods and therefore ideas. This explains to a certain extent the function of the “Code of the *Indigénat*”, which has long hindered the circulation of people inside the colony, and the weight of emigration according to the interests of the metropolis.

2) Printing has not always benefited vernacular languages since Arabic was marginalized in the educational system, and even more so *Tamazight*, which had no important written tradition

3) Arabic is also characterized by its diglossic use, which complicates the democratization of “high culture” (Gellner, 1993) especially in a situation of colonial oppression marked by the relatively low rates of schooling among the Natives, and acculturation generated by the system of education.

4) The administrative and political management of the colonies, achieved through partitioning, did not provide for a significant circulation of the writings other than those written in French (or in Spanish concerning Northern Morocco), which generally came from the metropolis and did not affect the bulk of the population (taking into

⁹ From Lenin and Rosa Luxembourg to Stalin, to the theses of the Third International, without forgetting those advocated by Austro-Marxism or Trotskyism (*cf.*, the many debates around the theme of Marxism and the National Question).

account the schooling rates), to which must be added the side-effects of censorship.

5) If some movements were allowed to people like traders, civil servants, students attracted by the *Zitouna* of Tunis, the *Qarawiyine* of Fez, or the University of Algiers, but also seasonal workers (or others), the flows were mainly oriented towards the metropolis (especially after the First World War), which explains the reason why nationalist intellectuals met mostly in France (where the *North African Star*, ENA) in 1926 and the Students Association – AEMNA in 1927 had been created).

The same was also true for the movements of circumscribed goods mostly limited to the traffic between the French ports (notably Marseilles) and each colony.

6) The circulation of the works written in Arabic and their reading, along with the circulation of the intellectuals was mainly oriented towards the Middle East (even if Tunis could be a staging point). This did not always promote the development of a Maghrebi consciousness conveyed by the Arabic language, but rather by the ideas of Pan Arabism and Pan Islamism. Thus if, at the beginning of the century there existed movements on the model of the “Young Turks”, “Young Arab” “Young Tunisians”, “Young Algerians” or “Young Moroccans”, there was no “Young Maghreb” movement.

7) After the proclamation of the Independence, the borders of the Nation States remained impermeable, and each one of them strived to create its own “national” culture and history, with highlights on the specificity of its character, even if the printed vernacular (Arabic or French) was the same. Each University is connected to France and to the West, to a certain extent to the Middle East (where an Arabic language cooperation has long been drawn from), but very little to the neighbouring countries.

8) If we add the countless political rivalries, it is easy to understand why there is so little space for the establishment of a solidly shared Maghreb Imaginary.

By Way of a... Tentative Conclusion

Can we reach a conclusion? Two aspects have caught our attention; without expanding on it, it is in fact possible to observe:

- A crisis of meaning and a crisis of the production of meaning, chiefly in the field of social sciences, due to the fact that the university scholars of our countries being in no position to construct or re-construct

the object “Maghreb”, remain confined in their own individual, isolated national creation on the one hand; on the other hand they propose more or less partitioned and necessarily ideologized approaches to an “International Scientific Community” still off-centered which sends the concepts and syntheses back to us. That is said, without meaning to offend our foreign colleagues or claiming to erect a Maghreb Nationalism of Thought and Research.

- The second aspect addresses the issue of identity and proposes a reflexion on the conditions of the evolution from community to society, from society to the individual-citizen, from national economy to global economy, from tradition to modernity... ; a huge programme, crucial to the achievement of a reconstruction of our relation to the existing Nation States, the Maghreb, the Mediterranean, and the rest of the world. I just have a proposition for one lane of exploration: the emergence of our Nation States has granted us with a secure nationality while we had only been “the Muslim Subjects” of a colonial Empire.

How could we not drown into the national disenchantment (Beji, 1982) while issuing the citizenship status which will open up new horizons for us? Can we expect to witness, from the ongoing construction of the European Union started in the middle of the 20th century, a kind of anterior future for the Maghrebi societies and shall we make it in time in a permanently changing world? Are we in a position to create anything other than the nostalgia of a communitarianism inherited from the past, a communitarianism now embroiled in a crisis generated by the growth of territorial nationalisms and a globalization more endured than shared, controlled by each and every one of our States?

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