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AFRO-ARAB TRAJECTORIES



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Afro-Arab Trajectories

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Of the neologisms coined by the late Kenyan-Omani historian Ali Mazrui, “Afrabia” is the most memorable. This was his attempt, inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois, to delineate an emancipatory geography of Africa that would include the Arabian Peninsula. Mazrui would observe that Madagascar - which is separated from the African continent by the 500-mile wide Mozambique Channel - is considered part of Africa, while Yemen, which is only “a stone’s throw” from and boasts age-old migratory, commercial, and cultural ties to the Horn of Africa, is not (Mazrui, 1986, p. 28-9; Mazrui, 1992). Mazrui, who spent much of his career, reflecting upon the shared histories and futures of Africa and the Arab world, would also popularize the term "Afro-Arab." He deployed this concept to describe not only "Black Arabs" or what he’d call, “Afrabians,” but also to refer to geographic overlay, ethnolinguistic mixing, and the solidarity projects of 1970s and 1980s that tried to promote inter-regional cooperation and combine pan-African and pan-Arab nationalism (Amin, 1986; Akinsanya, 1976).

This issue of *Souffles* uses Mazrui's concept of Afro-Arab as a point of departure to examine a range of encounters and phenomena from the legacies of slavery to colonial attempts to institutionalize "African" and "Arab" as separate political identities and attempts to create an Afro-Arab nationalism that joins Arabism with pan-African political thought. The term "Afro-Arab" is admittedly contested, often drawing criticism for positing Afro/African as separate and distinct from Arab. It is also a designation that is highly contingent and shifting (Villa-Vicencio, Doxtader, & Moosa, 2015; Mayyas, 2023). Julius Nyabenda demonstrates below how the meaning of “Afro-Arab” in Kenya has changed since the colonial era, such that the term today refers to a specific elite group, the upper-class Waungwana group in coastal Kenya, but not to the lower-class *raia*. Afro-Arab thus conjures an array of convergences and identities on the continent and in the diaspora. In this issue, historian Amal Ghazal suggests we speak of an "Afro-Arab continuum" to capture this multitude of encounters and political projects.

“Hegel’s Ghost”

If the boundary between Africa and the Arab world is a political artifact, the essays in this issue probe how “Afro-Arab” is also a construct, and invariably a political response to colonial social engineering. It was European colonialists who first decided that the Red Sea and the Sahara were to be boundaries or divides. Decades ago Ali Mazrui traced the incongruous trajectory of the term Africa (Mazrui, 1986, p. 25), “Ifriqiya,” once the Berber/Amazigh word for the northern coast of Africa, which would morph into "Africa" and be adopted by Afrikaners at the southern tip of the continent, and then be embraced by African American thinkers who conceived of Africa from Cairo to the Cape; and yet, nowadays the term has come to connote Africa belo

Sahara. The migration of the name reflects historic struggles within the continent and in the African diaspora over how to define and demarcate the African land mass. How Africa's internal and external borders are drawn has political, social, and cultural repercussions, defining not only boundaries of citizenship and inclusion but also patterns of racial exclusion and domination.[1]

The European view of the Sahara as a line dividing Africa is often traced to Hegel, who famously declared that "Africa…is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit." The German philosopher divided Africa into three regions: North Africa, which he called "European Africa"; northeast Africa, which he termed "the land of the Nile"; and then, "Africa proper," the land to the south and the west. He considered North Africa and the Nile Valley to be extensions of Europe and Asia, respectively. Of "Africa Proper," the land to the south and west, which provided slaves for the transatlantic trade, Hegel opined: "Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up…" (Hegel, 1975, 173-5). Hegel's division of the world into "people with history" and those without, his segmenting of Africa, and separating the northern tier from the rest the continent would shape colonial policies, academic disciplines, and generations of scholarship in Europe, America, and beyond.[2]

Even African scholars reproduced Hegel's designations. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), the seminal intellectual history of African philosophy, the Congolese thinker Valentin Mudimbe argued that knowledge production in Africa was dependent on Western languages and on the "colonial library," which provided conceptual frames for post-colonial African thought. Yet, as the Senegalese scholar Ousmane Kane observes, Mudimbe could only reach this conclusion by ignoring northern Africa and the "Islamic library" – the multitude of texts written in Arabic and '*ajami* across the Sahel and the Sahara, from the 16th century onward (Kane, 2016, p. 18).

As the progenitor of racial science, Immanuel Kant took these divisions even further in the 18th century (Mills, 2017). The German philosopher developed a formalized racial hierarchy underscoring the importance of skin color as evidence of superiority and inferiority. He divided humanity into four categories: "1/ the white race; 2/ the Negro race; 3/ the Hun race (Mongol or Kalmuck); and 4/ the Hindu or Hindustani race." Arabs, Moors, Persian, and Turkish-Tatars are included as sub-categories of the white race. Kant's elaborate hierarchy of race reflected ambivalence about Arabs and Muslims. While denigrating the Oriental races, white and non-

[1] For more on the boundaries between Middle East Studies and African Studies in American academia, see Hisham Aidi et al, "And the Twain Shall Meet: Connecting Africa and the Middle East" *POMEPS Studies 40* - Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides (June 2020).

[2] As recently as 1965, Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper would declare that "Africa was enveloped in darkness – like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America, and darkness is not a subject for history," adding, "[p]erhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa." Cited in Jacqueline Ki-Zerbo, *UNESCO General History of Afri Vol. I, Abridged Edition: Methodology and African Prehistory* (1990), p. 12.

white, he wrote positively about Islam and the Arabs, whom he considered white (Battersby, 2007, p. 75-77). This ambivalence about North Africa would resonate across the centuries. Kant and Hegel were equivocal about the racial status of North Africans (alternatively called Moors, Arabs, Berbers), but they did see them as different from the people below the Sahara. European racial scholars could never agree on the specific criteria for defining the concept of “race” let alone the correct order of the hierarchy. Whether emphasizing “skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry” (Lopez, 2006, p. 2) or public sentiment and political opinions, the exact racial position of North Africans was always contested. But it was generally agreed that they sat below the European and above the Black African.

These racial distinctions would then inform colonial patterns of rule. Segregating races according to their presumed racial-civilizational capacity became the logic of 19th century colonial governance. In North Africa, deep into the 1930s, French colonial administrators wrote tomes claiming that Arabs and Berbers were distinct races, with the latter deemed white, indigenous, and secular, thus more amenable to the French *mission civilisatrice* than the Oriental Arab settlers (Ageron, 1960; Gross & McMurray, 1993). Sudan would become a flash point for colonial administrators, as a territory straddling both North and Central Africa, with a long history of ethnic mixing. The British began to separate populations into categories of “Oriental Arabs” and “native Africans” and developed a policy of native administration in which North and South were governed according to different logics ostensibly reflecting the natural abilities of the two regions. This culminated in 1930, when the British adopted the “Southern Policy” that sought to regulate movement and interaction between the country’s “African” south and “Arab” north to protect the South from the nefarious economic and political intentions of their northern countrymen (Collins, 1983). As essays in this issue show, similar policies would be adopted in Kenya, Zanzibar, and Mauritania.

Less well-known is that the colonial conceptual separation of the North African (Moorish, Berber, or Arab) from the sub-Saharan (Negro) would make its way across the Atlantic. On the American plantation for instance, whether a Muslim slave was of North African or Sahelian origin and Arabic-speaking, or from “Black Africa” and not Muslim, determined their place in the plantation’s pecking order. As historian Michael Gomez has argued, the role of Muslim slaves and Islam in colonial and antebellum America “in the process of social stratification within the larger African American society… contributed significantly to the development of African American identity” (Gomez, 1998, p. 60). An estimated ten percent of the slaves brought to America were Muslim, many of whom were of Fulbe, Mande, and Senegambian background, whose features, according to the colonial Hamitic thesis, were thought to be closer to those of Europeans than of Africans. American slave owners saw Muslim slaves, “as more intelligent, more reasonable, more physically attractive, more dignified people” (Puckett, 1926, p. 528-9). Because of this thinking, Muslims slaves in the United States were often placed in positio

of power over other non-Muslim slaves, earning the distrust of other Africans and reinforcing the social construction of their difference.[3]

“Afro-Arab Time”

Colonial policies and trans-Atlantic slavery reinforced the Sahara as a racial marker and geographic divider. As decolonization began, one objective of anti-colonial movements was the challenging if not overturning of imperial cartographies. Prominent “Middle Eastern” actors on the African continent, such as Nasser’s Egypt, Muammar al Qaddafi’s Libya, and the Front de Libération Nationale’s (FLN) Algeria viewed themselves within an African context, as did many Third Worldist intellectuals and publics. As Mazrui has observed, both Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and Nasser of Egypt sought to “re-Africanize” their countries. Upon coming to power, for instance, Gamal Abdel Nasser would famously declare that Egypt falls within “three circles” – Arab, African, and Islamic. The Egyptian president aligned Cairo with the Soviet Union through his two decades of rule, and supported liberation movements from Algeria to Rhodesia to the Zanzibari revolution, where Africans rose up against an Afro-Arab ruling elite. Most newly independent African states, led by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia had a vision of pan-Africanism that included North Africa.

The meaning of pan-Africanism and unity would inspire much debate. The Egyptian leader, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Touré of Guinea belonged to the more radical Casablanca school which called for African unity, a pan-African army, and supported the FLN against France. Opposed to them were the more conservative Monrovia school – which included Nigeria, Senegal, and Cameroon – that stressed African statehood over pan-nationalism, and backed France in Algeria. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi was wary of Nasser’s interventionism and wanted a “sub-Saharan pan-Africanism.” Israel also competed with Egypt for the favors of African leaders. Nkrumah, an ally and competitor – was advised by the Trinidadian ex-Communist intellectual, George Padmore, who was sympathetic to Zionism and favored forging ties with Israel, to check Egyptian ambitions. He invited Golda Meir to address the All African People Conference in Accra in 1958.

In the early 1960s, the Pan-African academic project would find a home in African universities, specifically at Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (and to a lesser degree, the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Committee in Zamalek, Cairo). With Egypt’s shift into America’s orbit and the rise of Sadat, Egyptian Pan-Africanist Marxists like Samir Amin looked to Dakar where working with the Malawian scholar, Thandika Mkandawire, and others, he helped establish the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in 1973. Amin worked closely with the eminent historian Hilmi Sharaway,

[3] In his book *Prince Among Slaves* about the life of another prominent Muslim slave, Ibrahima Abdal Rahman, Terry Alford notes that Muslim slaves were used as “drivers, overseers and confidential servants which their numbers not justify” (Alford, 1986).

author of *Afro-Arab Times*, to translate classic works into Arabic and to bring Arab scholars into conversations about pan-Africanism (Sharawy, 2005).

The divide between North Africa and Africa was institutionalized even more as international institutions adopted and made policy based upon the category of "sub-Saharan Africa" (in lieu of the earlier "Tropical Africa" and "Black Africa"). Despite critiques from African scholars (Camara, 2005), it would form the basis of the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund's approach to the continent. The United Nations still considers 46 of Africa's 54 countries as sub-Saharan – excluding Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia ("About Africa"). For some reason, Eritrea is considered sub-Saharan but neighboring Djibouti is not. Language, race and ethnicity, geographic features, as well as level of economic development have all been put forth as reasons for how a country is classified, yet these rarely match the actual sorting of countries. For the World Bank, Mauritania, which is located largely in the Sahara, is classified as "sub-Saharan." Somalia and Djibouti located in the Horn of Africa are categorized as Middle East. It's worth recalling that the World Bank once placed apartheid South Africa in the MENA category, but once the country transitioned to Black majority rule, it was put in the "sub-Saharan" box ("What is sub-Saharan Africa?"). African organizations—such as the OAU and the African Development Bank—have since the 1960s tried to push back against such externally-imposed designations, preferring to speak instead of regional organizations like the East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States as its "building blocks."

African and Arab intellectuals have also attempted to remap Africa's geography. In a seminal article published at the start of this century, Achille Mbembe argued for a cosmopolitan ("Afropolitan") approach to the African experience that includes North Africa, starting with a reconfiguring of the geographies that continue to define the study of the continent (Mbembe, 2000). Mbembe calls attention to the long history of exchange that ran through multiple ancient corridors connecting North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa despite, or more accurately, because of the Sahara desert. In the last decade, a number of initiatives have emerged on the African continent – in Dakar, Johannesburg, Rabat, and Kampala – that are trying to connect African Studies with Middle East Studies so as to bridge the Saharan divide. Scholars in North Africa and the Middle East are increasingly noting the myriad ways that their (sub)regions are linked to Africa, not least through language and identity. North Africa's main ethnicities extend deep into "sub-Saharan Africa." Arabism stretches beyond the confines of the MENA region into northern Nigeria, Chad, Somalia, the Swahili coast, and Zanzibar. Likewise, Amazigh identity and nationalism continue into the Sahel – into Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Nor can the Gulf and the littoral areas of Eastern Africa be split from the Indian Ocean, given their long interconnections (Green, 2014).

Afro-Arab Studies?

Since its inaugural issue in 1966, *Souffles* has pondered how to simultaneously locate the Maghreb in Africa and the Arab world. Until its shutdown in 1972, *Souffles* was a vibrant forum discussing the ideas of Senghor, Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, and the poetry of Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. The essays in this issue revisit some of the questions addressed by *Souffles* – on Arabic language and identity, Negritude versus Fanonism, the meaning of the Sahara to nationalists – and show how the "Afro-Arab" idea is contingent and constructed in competing ways by different political actors and scholars. The contributions below address four broad themes: (1) the legacies of slavery; (2) anti-colonial solidarity and colonial legacies; (3) ideological and literary encounters between Afro- and Arab- nationalism; and (4) the project of Afro-Arab Studies.

On racism and slavery, Afifa Ltifi looks at the semantic legacies of slavery in Tunisia, and how the names inherited by Black Tunisians reinforce "invisibility and inferiority." Noting the absence of Black Tunisians from school textbooks and public education, Houda Mzioudet recounts the story of Zohra Hamdiyya, a Black woman from the southwestern oasis city of Gibili, who became Tunisia's first nurse. Zineb Faidi provides an ethnographic account of Gnawa practices in the city of Essaouira, Morocco, asking how market imperatives are shaping Gnawa narratives, and whether Gnawa exist at the crossroads of "Afro-Arab influences." Examining anti-colonial agitation in 1920s Paris, Oumar Ba draws attention to Lamine Senghor, the Senegalese *tirailleur* and Communist, who launched the League Against Imperialism, mobilizing people from far-flung colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to protest the Rif War. Baba Adou looks at how the post-colonial Mauritanian state chose to align with the Arab world and adopted an Islamic ideological framework and Arabization policies to overcome the divide between Arab- and Afro-Mauritanians. Similarly, Julius Nyabenda looks at shifting perceptions of Afro-Arab identity in Lamu and Mombasa.

On ideological cross-pollination, Nathaniel Matthews analyzes the socialist Ummah party of Zanzibar, founded by Abdulrahman Babu and other disaffected Afro-Arab leftists on the eve of the Zanzibari revolution of 1964, aiming to wed Marxism with pan-Africanism and Arabism. Hisham Aidi examines the influence of Leopold Senghor on Moroccan intellectual and political discourse, especially the Senegalese poet's central role in the Afro-Arab Forum launched in the town of Asilah in 1980. Ben Jones looks at Libyan scholar and poet Muhammad Qashat's particular brand of Saharan Arab nationalism that valorizes the ecology of the desert, language, lineage, and racial ties. Kribsou Diallou looks at the political activism and literary output of the Nubian novelist and Communist Mohamed Khalil Qassem, who served fifteen years in prison, and published the novel *Al-Shamandura* [The Buoy] in 1968. Zeyad El Nabolsy looks at parallels between the thought of Amilcar Cabral and Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani (two theorists central to the *Souffles-Anfas* project) and the significance they attributed to class analysis in the struggle against colonialism. Both thinkers held that the leaders of the first wave of

independence movements failed to understand that liberation from colonialism was not in the interests of all members of the colonized societies.

Finally, the aim of this issue of *Souffles* is also to ruminate on the emerging field of Afro-Arab Studies, to contemplate how to write the “Afro into Arab,” without repeating or feeding (neo)colonial categories and Western narratives. To that end, Zakia Salime’s essay surveys recent American writing on the “race question” in North Africa, proposing ways to decolonize the race debate, in part by drawing attention to Moroccan scholarship that preceded the recent Western discovery of the topic. Amal Ghazal’s reflection on Afro-Arab Studies in the Gulf, similarly looks at recent initiatives in Qatar and UAE that try to think trans-regionally across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. In our author interview, Touria Khannous discusses her most recent book, *Black–Arab Encounters in Literature and Film* (2021), a sweeping examination of “the Arab world’s racial complexities” through the representation of Black Africans in Arabic literature and film.

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Les Noirs tunisiens et les pièges du projet d'homogénéisation de Bourguiba[1]

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« La liberté doit être supprimée jusqu'à la fin de la guerre d'Algérie, jusqu'à ce que la nation devienne homogène. »

Habib Bourguiba[2]

En 2018, Trois Noirs tunisiens ont fait appel au ministère de la justice pour changer leurs noms de famille qu'ils trouvent injurieux. Leurs noms de famille عتيق الدالي (esclave affranchi d'el-Dali), الوريمي (*'urimi*) et الابيض (al-abyadh), n'évoquaient pas seulement le souvenir traumatisant de l'esclavage mais également leur propre écart généalogique dans un pays où la discrimination lignagère persiste.[3] Des noms de famille comme *chouchan*,[4] '*ucif* (esclave/serviteur), atig (affranchi) et autres, ne rappellent pas seulement la lignée introuvable des noirs tunisiens, mais aussi leur perpétuel sentiment d'être étrangers, les poussant à la marge de ce qui constitue une identité nationale tunisienne. La fluidité de ces patronymes, en particulier *chouchan* et '*ucif*, et leur capacité à se transformer en insultes témoignent de leur effet stigmatisant et expliquent la quête croissante de nombreux noirs tunisiens pour les changer.

La racialisation, comme un sous-produit de l'homogénéisation

L'étrange affaire des noms de famille des noirs tunisiens reste l'une des nombreuses lacunes du projet d'assimilation fondamentaliste de l'État-nation postcolonial et de ses politiques raciales mandatées par Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987), le père de la nation tunisienne moderne. Inspiré par la "turcité"[5] de Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Bourguiba s'est efforcé de créer un modèle de citoyenneté fondé sur la suprématie de la "Tunisianness/Tunisianité" (التونسة)[6] qui visait à homogénéiser les différents segments sociaux et à créer le sentiment commun d'appartenance à une nation tunisienne, au-delà des affiliations religieuses ou patrilinéaires.

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[1] Cet article a été initialement publié en anglais par *POMEPS Studies* en 2020. Voir Afifa Ltifi, « Disarticulating blackness or the semanitcs of (anti)blackness in Tunisia » *POMEPS Studies 40 – Africa and the Middle East : Beyond the Divides*, https://pomeps.org/disarticulating-blackness-or-the-semantics-of-antiblackness-in-tunisia.

[2] "No Time for Democracy." *TIME Magazine* 72, no. 13 (September 29, 1958): 21.

[3] Alors que le nom de famille d'Atig al-Dali signifie "esclave affranchi de la famille al-Dali", al-Abyadh et L'urimi sont les noms de famille de deux familles propriétaires d'esclaves.

[4] En tant que groupe, les *chouachines* (pluriel de *chouchan*) ont historiquement précédé les Africains noirs de l'Ouest (principalement les Kanuri et les Hausa) en Tunisie. Ils auraient été réduits en esclavage vers 1738 sous l'égide de Youssef Dey (1610-1637), le souverain turc qui a construit le marché aux esclaves de Suq el-Birka, pour la vente exclusive d'esclaves noirs. Voir aussi, Ismael Montana, "The Borie Colonies of Tunis" in *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, ed. Behnaz Mirzai, et al. (Africa World Press, 2009), 155-168.

[5] Carl L. Brown, "Bourguiba and Bourguibism Revisited: Reflections and Interpretation." *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (2001): 43-57. Accessed 14 March 2020.

[6] Bien que les historiens fassent remonter son origine à la dynastie berbère des Hafsides (1229-1574), la tunisianité, idéologie de l'unité et de l'homogénéité, est devenue une idéologie officielle de l'État décolonial depuis les années 1920. Voir aussi Sophie Bessis, *Histoire de La Tunisie : De Carthage à nos Jours* (Paris : Talla 2019.)

Pour lui, la persistance de la parenté agnatique et par alliance au sein de la société était antagoniste avec le projet global de formation de l'État.

Pour démanteler la force politique du "La République des cousins,"[7] Bourguiba s'est lancé dans une série de règles bureaucratiques rigides qu'il a consolidées avec le patriarcat,[8] incarné par sa propre image du père de la nation (*al-zaim).*[9] Des réformes et des politiques d'État agressives telles que la centralisation du gouvernement et l'introduction d'un droit progressif de la famille avaient pour but de cultiver le modèle de la famille nucléaire et de détacher les individus de leurs groupes de parenté élargis.[10]

Les noms patronymiques ont été introduits en 1959[11] en s'appuyant sur les politiques de conscription ayant débuté en 1860 sous le règne du bey hussainide Sadok (1859-1882). En tant qu'État**,** également investi dans la gestion de la société postcoloniale/post-impériale, les noms de famille sont devenus indispensables pour faire valoir les droits au savoir et au pouvoir face aux autorités patrimoniales locales. Pour affaiblir le pouvoir des alliances agnatiques et de leur parenté fictive, l'État a utilisé les noms de famille légaux, entre autres, pour légiférer un changement d'identité collective des loyautés tribales et des structures de parenté généalogique vers l'unité figurative de la "famille tunisienne," symboliquement incarnée par le leader national Habib Bourguiba. En conséquence, des comités locaux ont été formés et chargés d'éliminer les noms patronymiques qui reflétaient les lignées tribales ininterrompues et de désigner ceux qui avaient interdit l'infinité généalogique, caractéristique des pratiques de dénomination habituelles de l'époque. Après avoir créé et diffusé des noms de famille héréditaires fixes, l'État postcolonial s'est ensuite lancé dans une campagne de révision[12] des noms de famille qui a duré jusqu'aux années 1970, visant les noms et prénoms jugés incivils, stigmatisants ou ayant un caractère étranger c'est-à-dire non-maghrébin/non-tunisien. Les noms de famille qui ont une connotation, étrangère, comme "Gnawi" ou "El-Hausi,"[13] ou qui évoquaient les hiérarchies du passé impérial décadent, ont également été interdits. Avec la suspension du beylicat, les descendants de la dynastie des Husainides **(**1705-1957) n'ont pas été autorisés à porter le titre de courtoisie du "Bey" comme nom de famille ; on leur a préféré Al-Hussayni, Ibn Husseyn ou El-Adel.[14]

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[7] En s'inspirant du *La République des cousins* de Germaine Tillion. Voir Germaine Tillion, *The Republic of Cousins: Women's Oppression in Mediterranean Society* (Al Saqi Books, 1983).

[8] Mounira M. Charrad, "Central and Local Patrimonialism: State Building in Kin-Based Societies," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 636 (2011): 49.

[9] Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le Syndrome Autoritaire: Politique En Tunisie De Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 2003), 73-89.

[10] Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: the Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 57.

[11] Il est important de noter qu'Ahmed Bey (1837-1855) avait également conscrit des militaires qui ont combattu aux côtés des Français, des Anglais, des Ottomans et des Sardes lors de la guerre de Crimée (1853-1856), contre les Russes. Pour el-Habashi, les conscriptions militaires ont plutôt commencé pendant la période coloniale. Voir Mohamed Ali El-Habashi *Altunisiyūn, al-ūsūl wa 'al-Alkāb* (Manshurāt Stumidia, 2018).

[12] M. El-Habashi, *Altunisiyūn,* 99.

[13] Last names like *bel-Manoubi as well.* See, El-Habashi, *Altunisiyūn,*184-185.

[14] See El-Habashi, *Altunisiyūn,* 95.

Pourtant, dans le cadre de ce processus de changement et de révision des noms de famille, des noirs tunisiens ont subi un schéma de changement atypique qui les a transformés en citoyens-sujets. Si certains noms de famille comme *chouchan* (descendant d'esclave libre) ont été changés par Shair, Hamrouni et Zitouni, ces noms de famille nouvellement acquis ont renforcé les relations clientélistes qui liaient les descendants d'esclaves et des maîtres. Bien qu'ils n'évoquent pas explicitement la mémoire de l'esclavage ou le passé impérial ottoman que l'État cherchait à effacer, ces nouveaux noms ne sont pas profondément ancrés dans la structure de parenté. Ainsi, l'absence de parenté des noirs tunisiens a été explicitement soulignée par l'attribution de noms de famille qui mettaient en évidence leur subordination généalogique.

Ironiquement, certains des noms de famille nouvellement acquis ont instantanément ressuscité l'histoire de l'esclavage et de la servitude. Des noms considérés comme des insultes racistes à l'image de *'ucif* et *chouchan* sont bien adoptés aujourd'hui comme des noms de famille légaux dans les documents officiels comme les actes de naissance et les cartes d'identité nationales[15]. Un troisième groupe de noirs tunisiens a été encore plus humilié avec des noms de famille de tribus esclavagistes ; c'est-à-dire qu'une famille noire en Tunisie peut porter le nom d'"esclave affranchi" d'une riche "famille esclavagiste."[16]

En revanche, les esclaves blancs ou *mamluks*,[17] originaires d'Europe de l'Est, de Méditerranée septentrionale et de Circassie, n'ont pas subi le poids de l'esclavage de leurs ancêtres.[18] Compte-tenu de leur phénotype noir, leur pratique de dénomination historiquement ancrée, leur proximité physique en tant que membres de la famille fictive élargie de leurs anciens maîtres, les noirs tunisiens ont été davantage racialisés et classés en tant que descendants d'esclaves, ce qui n'était pas le cas des anciens esclaves blancs.[19]

Les descendants d'esclaves blancs ont été intégrés dans une culture qui les valorisait pour leur couleur de peau,[20] tandis que les noirs tunisiens sont passés d'une catégorie sociale d'esclaves à celle de descendants d'esclaves. C'est peut-être l'intégration historique des femmes blanches esclaves dans le harem et l'établissement de liens de sang avec l'élite ottomane qui les ont protégées et aidées à surmonter la discrimination fondée sur le lignage. En ce qui concerne les esclaves blancs de sexe masculin, incorporés dans le système militaire esclavagiste *Kouloughli*, cela est peut-être dû à leur puissance antérieure inégalée qui n'a pas complètement disparu sous le colonialisme ou après l'avènement de l'État-nation.

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[15] Mariem Nasri, "Alkaab Onsoria," *The New Arab* (11 August 2015).
[16] Nada Issa, "Tunisia's Dirty Secret," *Aljazeera* (17 March 2016).
[17] Le sens littéral du mot "mamelouk" est "possédé". Les mamelouks n'ont jamais été désignés comme des esclaves ou des serviteurs. Même les termes arabes tunisiens locaux les désignant n'ont jamais été racialisés et ont divergé de ceux réservés aux esclaves noirs et aux descendants d'esclaves.
[18] Il est important de rectifier que le système d'esclavage ottoman était souvent multiethnique et qu'il incluait des sujets blancs réduits en esclavage, originaires des rives de la Méditerranée septentrionale, de Circassie et d'Europe de l'Est.
[19] À travers l'histoire du mamelouk Hussein Bin Abdallah et les querelles autour de son héritage, l'ouvrage de l'historien M'hamed Oualdi, Slave Between Empires, met en évidence le pouvoir sociopolitique et économique des sujets mamelouks, dont ne disposaient pas les esclaves noirs. Voir, M'hamed Oualdi, *A Slave between Empires: a Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.)
[20] Salvatore Bono, *D'esclaves à marins dans la méditerranée de l'époque Moderne* (L' Harmattan, 2006), 7

On peut dire que ces tentatives d'éradication de la force politique du patrimonialisme local sont ambivalentes. D'une part, les hiérarchies lignagères ont été largement dépassées par la majorité dans la Tunisie contemporaine[21]. De telles politiques de modernisation discriminatoire auraient même pu contrecarrer les relations clientélistes dans lesquelles de nombreux descendants d'esclaves ont été piégés depuis la manumission (1846/1890) jusqu'à l'indépendance (1956). En outre, l'accent mis par l'État sur la famille nucléaire et l'éradication des relations tribales ont permis aux noirs tunisiens à prendre relativement leurs distances de ces liens de subordination, car ils étaient eux aussi considérés comme des citoyens tunisiens et étaient encouragés à adopter le modèle de la famille nucléaire en tant que base de parenté, afin de surmonter leurs propres affiliations tribales qui les liaient de plus en plus aux tribus de leurs anciens maîtres. La réforme agressive de l'État a également atténué le pouvoir politique des tribus qui étaient non seulement dangereux pour la formation d'un État homogène, mais aussi pour leur attachement aux théories prémodernes de la pureté raciale de l'ascendance arabo-berbère qui auraient aggravé la situation déjà compliquée des noirs tunisiens. Bien que l'adhésion des clans aux formes prémodernes de discrimination lignagère n'ait pas perdu son efficacité dans l'historicisation des origines des noirs tunisiens en tant que descendants d'esclaves, son pouvoir reste limité.

D'un autre côté, l'affaiblissement de cette solidarité fondée sur la parenté et du pouvoir politique des tribus pourrait également avoir perpétué les relations clientélistes dans le pays. Je postule que le nouvel autoritarisme patriarcal incarné par la bureaucratie stimulant le changement**,** a peut-être réduit les prétentions des tribus au pouvoir politique, mais a involontairement renforcé leur attachement aux marqueurs symboliques et au prestige d'une époque révolue, celle de la propriété des esclaves. Dans un besoin désespéré d'affirmer leur supériorité désormais limitée, les tunisiens d'ascendance dite "arabe" noble se sont accrochés à ce qui témoignait de leur gloire passée. Ils ont cherché à renforcer les codes d'honneur pour préserver des relations de subordination qui ne procuraient plus aucun avantage économique, mais plutôt des images abstraites qui authentifiaient un passé d'une lignée honorable et d'une richesse provenant du commerce d'esclaves.

De l'autre côté du spectre, les descendants d'esclaves noirs sont également encouragés ou manipulés pour continuer à jouer certains rôles traditionnels renforçant la relation patron-client, comme cuisiner pendant les rites de passage et les cérémonies de mariage, et pour lesquels ils sont symboliquement récompensés. Cette complicité des descendants d'esclaves est peut-être exacerbée par leurs privations économiques et leur perte de pouvoir. Dans ses tentatives de rupture avec ce qui a précédé sa formation, l'État-nation tunisien n'a jamais reconnu le désavantage économique dont les descendants d'esclaves continuent de souffrir, car cette reconnaissance risque de singulariser le groupe, ce qui, dans un pays qui cherche à

[21] Les théories prémodernes tunisiennes sur la lignée n'avaient pas le même poids sociopolitique qu'en Mauritanie ou au Soudan, par exemple. Au moins dans un pays doté des lois sur la citoyenneté les plus progressistes d'Afrique du Nord et du monde arabophone, ces mythes d'origine arabe ont fini par contredire les efforts de modernisation de l'État-nation.

s'homogénéiser, peut aller à l'encontre de l'essence même de son idéologie nationale. Il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une critique de l'introduction et de la révision des noms patronymiques, mais aussi des politiques de l'État qui ciblent les alliances fondées sur la parenté dans le pays. L'attention portée à ces puissantes tribus a détourné l'attention des groupes sociaux qui leur étaient historiquement subordonnés. La rigidité des politiques de modernisation qui prétendaient consacrer la citoyenneté entière n'a pas effacé les stigmates de l'esclavage ni restauré la dignité des noirs tunisiens.

Les noirs tunisiens ont désormais cherché à changer les noms de famille qu'ils considéraient comme humiliant et évocateur d'une histoire stigmatisante d'esclavage et de servitude. Si certains ont réussi à changer leurs noms, de nombreux noirs tunisiens se sont heurtés à la rigidité de la bureaucratie de l'État, et plus particulièrement à la loi sur le nom de famille. Avec la dissolution des comités des noms de famille dans les années 1970, les demandes de changement des noms de famille sont généralement rejetées ou restent en suspens au ministère de la justice. On peut donc conclure que l'avènement de l'État-nation, bien qu'il ait supplanté certaines de ces questions de lignage et de race, n'a pas réussi à supprimer le fardeau de l'histoire qui pesait sur la formation de l'identité des noirs tunisiens.

Dans une large mesure, on peut considérer que le projet d'assimilation soutenu par l'État a réussi à réduire les différences et à affaiblir les alliances fondées sur la parenté qui auraient pu contrarier davantage l'intégration des noirs tunisiens. Cependant, il n'a pas non plus réussi à effacer l'idée de l'esclavage de la mémoire collective, mais a plutôt exacerbé la discrimination raciale pratiquée à leur encontre, considérant qu'ils sont des descendants perpétuels d'esclaves.

Aujourd'hui, l'héritage de l'esclavage est toujours présent et difficile à supprimer de la mémoire nationale officielle et de l'historiographie, et dans la sémantique jamais effacée qui l'évoque dans les noms de famille des noirs tunisiens. La persistance de ces épithètes anachroniques, à la fois comme insultes et comme noms de famille, ne témoigne pas seulement de la racialisation de l'esclavage, mais aussi du mépris du noir qui est généralement assimilé à l'esclavage, dans un continent où la négrité est supposée être une partie intégrante de son identité.

Traduit de l'anglais par Yousra El Hamdaoui

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Invisible No More: The Saga of Tunisia's First Nurse

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Rarely in modern Tunisia have black Tunisians taken up a leading role or even a symbolic place in its narrative, especially in the pre- and post-colonial nation-making period. Apart from scant figures with marginal roles in post-independence Tunisia such as Taieb Sahbani, Bourguiba'a director of cabinet, a nationalist militant, and a diplomat, or Béchir Gueblaoui a former Tunisia's diplomat in some East and West African countries, no black Tunisian female figure has had any appearance gracing any schoolbook, history book let alone a newspaper or magazine that feature Tunisian women figures in politics, art, sports, academia, economy, medicine and society (Mzioudet, 2023; Mrad-Dali, 2015). In a country that always celebrates Tunisian women's achievements and extols their significant role in the country's national movement as fighters against French colonialism, it further renders black Tunisian men and women almost totally absent from contributing to the nation's narrative. Black Tunisian activists have been collecting and chronicling evidence of black Tunisian figures' contributions to the national narrative. These include, among others, Slim Marzoug and "Halima Ezzaima" from Gabes. Ezzaima was decorated by former president, Habib Bourguiba as a form of gratitude for having hid him from the French authorities in her house, when he was fleeing them to the south of Tunisia in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ezzaima was a local nationalist fighter (*moujahida*) against French colonization (Ezzaima, 2021). Another black Tunisian hero of the fight against French colonialism was Nasser Madani, a fallen hero of the Battle of Agri in the governorate of Tataouine who fought French aggression against the town in 1956 and whose heroic fight was featured by Tunisian journalist, AmanAllah Mansouri, as part of his work on transitional justice for the Truth and Dignity Commission in 2018 (Truth and Dignity Commission, 2018).

In this piece, I chronicle the fabulous life of Zohra Hamdiyya, from the southwestern oasis city of Gibili, who is credited to be Tunisia's first nurse.

Black Tunisian women breaking the racial glass ceiling:

Black Tunisian women living in southern Tunisia have broken the racial glass ceiling open since the 1970s and 1980s, going up the social ladder through education, training to become nurses. They disavowed the stereotypical image of black Tunisian women as being mere submissive creatures, confined to menial jobs and positions inherited from the era of slavery, like maids in rich "white" southern Tunisian people's households, nannies and spiritual healer s(the famous *chabbaha* or fortune teller through the invocation of higher spirits). Even in a conservative environment where women are confined to their households, some got a rudimentary education up to the early years of secondary school and joined nursing and midwifery programs at regional hospitals.

A trip down memory lane:

My most prominent recollection of Black presence in Tunisia remains the southwestern oasis city of Gibili, historically situated at the trans-Saharan slave triangle of Gibili-Douz-Tozeur, when caravans carrying slaves from West Africa and the Sahel made it become one of the main hubs of the African slave trade in Tunisia. I first visited it in 2009, under the recommendation of a local and former work colleague at the University of Tunis, who told me about a mysterious slavery museum. Later, I learned from civil society activists, who are the members of Old Gibili's Preservation Association that it was the house of one of its eminent residents of the Souf tribe in Tripolitania (modern day northwestern Libya) and whose president Mhemed Souf is one of its descendants.[1] Next to the house lies the former slave market, a barren square that holds no sign of the horrific practice that lasted until 1846, the year Tunisia abolished slavery across the Ottoman Regency. The place testifies to a forgotten part of Tunisian history that remains invisible and marginalized in Tunisian school history curriculum.

[1] Interview with civil society activist, Kais Ben Yaakoub, head of the association in Old Gibili, April 17, 2018.

I visited old Gibili in August 2022 where I met with a local civil society activist, Anis Chaieb, who created a Facebook group, "The Museum of Nefzawa,"[2] which gathered old and rare photos and different archival documents (including maps and historical records of Ottoman rulers of the area), some of which go back to the early 17th century.[3] He once shared with the group a photo and an old article from *Essabah*[4] (the most popular Arabic-language newspaper in Tunisia) about Tunisia's first nurse, a black woman from Gibili. While Tunisia celebrated its first female doctor, Tawhida Ben Cheikh, by memorializing her in the 10-Dinar banknote in 2020, almost no trace of Zohra Ben Hamdiyya,[5] Gibili's pride, can be found in any historical book. Incidentally, Gibili named the COVID-19 Unit in the regional hospital after her.[6]

The article in *Essabah* recounts the saga of Hamdiyya, a self-sacrificing and brave woman who made national history in 1971 when the Tunisian Minister of Health decorated her with the Tunisian Medal of Appreciation for her dedicated care of the sick at Tunisia's oldest hospital, Aziza Othmana, which she joined in 1931. Her fortune lies in the benevolence of the demimondaine-turned-Princess Marie Anne Ghika (Liane de Pougy), wife of Prince Georges Ghika, of Romania, who were visiting the Nefzawa region in 1913. The story, as Hamdiyya recounted to the journalist, sounded more like a fairy tale for the daughter of a postman. She was noticed by the princess, who asked Hamdiyya's father to take her to her residence in the posh suburb of Saint-Germain-Des-Prés, where little Zohra was given specialized education on cooking, furniture organization, good manners, protocols of welcoming visitors, in addition to French-language instruction. Returning to Gibili after the end of WWI, Zohra joined Tunisia's first vaccination campaign for the Tunisian kingdom. Working as a translator between locals and the military doctor who was supervising the vaccination campaign in Nefzawa, she came to represent a model of a courageous woman who broke the societal rules of her conservative society, where women were rarely allowed to be in public let alone travel alone, as Zohra did throughout the region to vaccinate women and girls. Her story is that of a self-sacrificing nursing

[2] Nefzawa Museum Facebook group, https://www.facebook.com/groups/315435372805856/?ref=share
[3] Interview with Anis Chaieb in Old Gibili, August 27, 2022.
[4] Hachemi Souf, *Essabah*, August 5, 1973.
[5] Her full name is Zohra Bint Ali Hamdiyya. See https://www.encyclopediefemmes.tn/specific_fiche/zohra-ben-hamdia.
[6] See Gibili's regional hospital COVID-19 Unit Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/SORKebiliCORON

career, healing the sick in Tunisia's hospitals and cooperating with the French Red Cross and the Tunisian Red Crescent.

Below is excerpt from the Essabah article about Zohra Hamdiyya:

In a modest apartment in Bab Bnet Avenue, in Tunis, Zohra Hamdiyya, Tunisia's first nurse, leads a happy and content life… In 1931, the nurse, Zohra Ben Hamdiyya, stepped foot in Aziza Othmana Hospital, which is currently the Sadiki Hospital, for the first time. She became the first Tunisian woman to hold a nursing job officially. After several years passed, she retired. Then, the nurse returned to her hometown of Gibili to recount to us memories of years of adventure and her admirable, patriotic duty when nurses were scarce and female nurses in hospitals were non-existent.

"**A princess riding a pile of iron"**

Zohra recounts: "When I was little, my father Ali Ben Hamdiyya, who was a postman in the municipality of Gibili, used to shower me with his love more than the rest of my siblings. I used to visit him at his office. The French director of the post office had a little girl who was attending primary school, so the post office director asked my father to give me permission to keep his daughter company whenever she went to school. My father did not hesitate and agreed to that (with no hesitation) and let me join the school that was a boys' only school. I attended it thereafter. One day when I was returning to our house close to the post office with some companions, we saw a crowd of people jostling to watch a moving iron pile; and whenever it let out some smoke plume, they would scream "Hey, hey, hi" and would applaud.

Then, we ran towards the pile, which in fact was a carriage of the first car that had ever arrived in the town of Gibili. This was in 1913. In that car was Prince Georges Ghika of Romania and his wife Princess Marie Anne Ghika (Liane de Pougy) with some of their subordinates. They came from the outskirts of Paris for tourism. They crossed the regions of the Algerian oases and then [arrived in] Tunisia. In Algeria, they had traveled through Biskra, went to Tuggart and then El Waad, and finally crossed into Tunisia, visiting the Jerid and Nefzawa regions.

I caught the princess’ eye and she instructed the driver to pull over and pointed at me while smiling. I was shy and hid. However, the desire to get inside the car was haunting me. I kept following the moving iron pile. Fate and chance played their roles. Just a few moments later, my father was brought in by the officer of civil affairs, Captain Séjour, who pleaded with my father that he let me go to France with the princess. My father refused, insisted on not handing me to anyone. He eventually backed off when he saw the prince and his wife’s pleading with him and my passion for riding in the car, so he had no choice but give his consent. In return, a document was signed, pledging that I would be instructed and educated.

Thus, Zohra moved from Gibili to “Tunisia Palace” in Tunis, and finally, Saint-Germain-Des-Prés in the suburbs of Paris. She said: “I received an education with specialized teachers, and lived in the care of the princess, who would show her about facets of the palace. The maids would show her the work that they do in the palace such as cooking, furniture organization, and the protocols for welcoming visitors. Zohra happened to get acquainted with and followed the movement that ravaged Europe in that historically explosive period that ended with the WWI, which lasted between 1914 and 1918. Despite the war climate prevailing in Europe, the late Ali Hamdiyya, the father of Zohra Ben Hamdiyya, would send letters to the caretakers of his daughter. He eventually asked them to send her back. They then complied with his request and Zohra returned to Tunis, then Gibili.

Taking part in the the nationwide vaccination campaign:

After the end of WWI, the French colonial authorities officially decreed to vaccinate the population of the Tunisian kingdom. The military physician, Dr. Bernas arrived in the southern oases. He was entrusted with the supervision of the vaccination campaign given that Nefzawa locals took part in the war with 1300 soldiers. Some members of the contingent returned to their hometown, but how would they vaccinate women when most men refused to expose their women and girls to the male doctor?

The officer of civil affairs was perplexed by this case. It did not take him long to find the solution. Zohra came forward as a volunteer to vaccinate the women and the villages of Nefzawa. Zohra sometimes worked with the doctor and other times, on her own, traveling the region’s villages, moving from one hut to another, riding a donkey, a mule or a camel in order to get to the most distant and isolated areas in the Tunisian Sahara Desert.

When the campaign ended in Nefzawa, Zohra married one of the families’ sons and stayed at home. She was only home a short while before she was called by Dr. Bernas and his nurse, Ms. Lucien-Saint, to join her in the Jerid region to carry out a similar campaign. She came to her husband and told him about Bernas and Saint’s suggestion for her to join the campaign, but he refused to give her his consent. This was the second time Zohra was emboldened to sacrifice her personal life and thus her marriage, despite her young age. The argument over the campaign issue ended with their divorce and she traveled to the Jerid region to carry out her duty in the campaign, deeply believing that her presence was necessary and inevitable. Indeed, her presence was one of the reasons for the success of the campaign in a region that was conservative in its traditions during that time. Zohra also traveled to the region of the Jerid to vaccinate the women and the girls of the oases from Debabsha to Tameghza. By getting to know her, they found solutions to many of their health problems. When the aforementioned campaign ended, she returned to her hometown, while Dr. Bernas moved to Tunis with the nurse Lucien-Saint. In Gibili’s clinic, Zohra worked with Lucien-Saint’s team as the interpreter, where she assisted hundreds of patients

Zohra’s new nursing life in Tunis:

Days and months passed, during which Zohra attempted, through the Centre of Civil Affairs to receive permission for her to work in the hospital. She was eventually recruited as a nurse in Aziza Othmana hospital in 1931. There she met again with Dr. Bernas and his assistant, Ms. Lucien-Saint. Zohra said: “it was a surprise for the doctor who used to reject the admission of Tunisians in the public health sector.” Thus, Zohra Hamdiyya took upon herself the responsibilities of coordinating between the doctors and the patients in that dreadful period in Tunisian political and social life, and she committed herself to carry out her new responsibilit

First, through social counselling, Zohra travelled near and far in order to find poor families that represented a large percentage of Tunisian population, particularly in the capital city's outskirts. She would offer to the working-class families to put their newborns in the hospital, in return for taking charge of all the babies' layette and a financial support of 50 francs for each birth. Zohra succeeded in bringing all the poor women and created conditions for successful births.

As a nurse, her work was to treat patients and give solace to the afflicted from all social classes all day long and sometimes at night, bringing joy to the poor and elderly people, who were the majority of the hospital's patients. Her dedication largely resonated with the people who would regularly visit the hospital, and it conferred her work with a [positive] reputation, reflective of the compassion that flows from her dutifulness. She [also] bestowed [this compassion] upon the visitors to the Sadiki Hospital and later the Rabta Hospital. Her reputation allowed her to travel everywhere in Tunisia and even abroad.

She worked as a translator as there were no male nurses, except for the late Sadeq Ben Ammar and she had to explain women's illnesses to the French doctors as 99% of visitors did not know French. Zohra commented on this with a broad smile: "you see how I was a useful tool at a time when a woman was only [considered] good for staying. at home and thus, I feel happiness overcoming me as I was the last wheel in the social train that tried to move forward. There is no soaring without health."

Zohra's resilience and strong will against all odds:

In her personal life, Zohra was a lively person who succeeded in overcoming the desires of the mind and the body, turning her enthusiasm and spiritual revolution of her youthful age into something positive. Therefore, she did not drown like her peers in fantasies, marginal things, and futile adventures. She instead turned her enthusiasm into an immense work, social efficiency, and human well-being. She would pay attention and give importance to works of charity and cooperation organizations. She would spend time with the Red Cross, then with the Tunisian Red Crescent with her colleagues, such as Tunisia's first midwife, Badra Ben Mostfa. She would

attend middle-class boys' circumcision ceremonies and would work cooperating with Ben Miled clinic in the Halfaouine area of the medina of Tunis. As for the vacations, she would take them to rest from exhaustion and overwork and to dedicate herself to her new husband, with whom she had more affinity. However, many problems started to arise in her life, further disturbing her marriage.

During the years Zohra spent in the hospital, she had the opportunity to get the equivalent of the experience of dozens of doctors, with whom she worked as a nurse. Additionally, she was fond of reading. One day she felt she was mature enough, given her ability to perform another mission for society and she was in the age of giving and benefiting others. She hoped that she could become a supervisor in one of the hospital's wings. She waited to get promoted. Alas, the sneaking years did not give her a second chance as retirement devastated her wishes and limited her big ambitions. One day in 1971, during a festive celebration, the Minister of Health decorated her with the State's Medal of Appreciation and to congratulate her in the name of the Tunisian state for her ongoing battle for sick people, while announcing her retirement on that occasion.

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Lamine Senghor, Anti-Imperialism, and Afro Arab Solidarity in Interwar Paris

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"They murdered our brothers in the first war in Morocco, the Great War, in the Rif and Syria, in Madagascar and Indonesia."
-- Lamine Senghor, 1927

The post-World War II era constitutes a privileged moment in the historiography of anti-imperialism, decolonization, Black internationalism, and Third World solidarity. Many of the initial iterations and founding moments of these movements, however, can be traced back to interactions between peoples from the far corners of the empires who came into contact and mobilized against imperialism during the interwar period in various European capitals. In fact, those European capitals offered a hub for anticolonial militantism, as students, workers, conscripted soldiers, and other activists converged in the metropole, before and during the Great War. In the heart of interwar Europe then, a burgeoning anti-imperial (and communist) coalition of various movements and figures was forged, shaking the imperial foundations of the world order.

Using Lamine Senghor (not to be confused with Senegal's first president Léopold Senghor) as an anchor figure of this period, this article revisits the anti-imperial moment in interwar France, highlighting the transracial and transcontinental junctions and solidarity coalitions amidst France's racial anxieties and attempts to preserve the prestige of a declining empire. This is a story of transnational and transracial solidarity, foregrounding the linkages between anti-imperial activists from West Africa, North Africa, the Levant, and Indochina with French communist and leftist circles. For these coalitions, the mobilization against the Rif War became one the main

themes of the anti-imperial agenda of the time. This article is based on primary sources located in the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence and the archives of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam.

The Foundations of an Anti-Imperial World Order in Interwar Europe

The end of the Great War saw a reconfiguration of the world order, with the advent of the League of Nations. Three empires (Ottoman, German, and Austro-Hungarian) disappeared from the world map. It was however clear to the colonized world that the new sets of institutions were not designed for, or capable of delivering emancipation. In fact, self-determination, as Woodrow Wilson envisioned it, was never meant to be all-encompassing.[1] The League of Nations' Mandate system was a clear example of the restrictive nature of the principle of self-determination and an emerging international order predicated on the perpetuation of global racial hierarchy. In such a context of disappointment regarding the League of Nations in interwar Europe, anti-colonialist movements crystallized around the formation of a new and alternative set of coalitions and institutions, including the League Against Imperialism (hereafter, LAI or the League). The League formed as a solidarity movement and provided a counterpoint to the League of Nations,[2] becoming therefore the first attempt to create a truly anti-imperial and anti-capitalist *global* coalition.[3]

The League Against Imperialism was founded during a congress in Brussels in February 1927. The meeting convened some 174 delegates from 34 countries and representing 134 organizations.[4] Delegates from around the world gathered in Brussels to found a truly global anti-imperialst organization. The meeting included, for instance, delegates of the ANC from South Africa. From Morocco, Ahmed Hassan Mattar attended, representing *Presse de l'Arabie.* Messali Hadj, Hadjali Abdelkader, and Chedli Ben Mustapha participated as delegates of *Etoile Nord-Africaine,* an independentist movement for Algeria. Destour, a Tunisian political party, participated in the 1927 Brussels congress as well. Persia had a number of representatives, including Suleiman Mirza, a member of the parlimanet for *Parti republicain,* the socialist Mahmoud Aga Riza, and Ahmed Assadoff and Mortesa Alawi from the *Parti republicain revolutionaire*. Bakri Bey from the Syrian National Committee was there, as well as a delega

from the labor party of Palestine. Jamal al-Husayni represented the Arab National Congress of Palestine.[5] Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta from Indonesia, and Nehru representing the Indian National Congress attended the meeting as well.[6] There were also delegates from the Chinese Kuomintang, the American Civil Liberty Union, as well as labor unions and student organizations across Europe, the Caribbbean, and Latin America.

The meeting, according to its agenda, sought to "[build] a permanent international organization in order to link up all forces combatting international imperialism and in order to ensure their effective support for the fight of emancipation conducted by oppressed nations."[7] In its founding manifesto, the League stated its goal as the achievement of "Complete independence for China, India, Indochina, for the European countries, for Negro Africa, for the Latin-America and other semi-colonial countries, [and] complete right of self-determination for all oppressed nations and national minorities."[8] As the journal *La Voix des Nègres* recounted in its March 1927 issue, at the Brussels meeting, "over the course of five days and five nights, delegates of all peoples, nations, and countries, of all races and all classes… came together to denounce imperialism's harms and exactions on their respective countries and call for its demise."[9]

Yet, the League was not just anti-imperialist. It was equally anti-capitalist, and in the imperial metropoles where it took root it focused on the interconnectedness of struggles across the far reaches of the empires. As Max Bloncourt, the Guadeloupean lawyer and member of the French Communist Party's Union Intercontinentale (UIC), stated during his speech at the Brussels conference, "For the past ten years, events have occurred around the world. It is the Russian Revolution that made the Chinese Revolution possible. Because they defeated British imperialism, that will make India achieve its national independence."[10] The League however lasted only a decade, having disintegrated by 1936, under the weight of internal conflicts, pressure from European governments, and the rise of Nazi Germany.

Lamine Senghor: An *Agitateur* in the Metropole

Lamine Senghor, the Senegalese *tirailleur*, communist, and anti-imperialist militant, emerged on the European scene in the mid-1920s as "the most influential black anti-colonial activist of th

period."[11] Unlike Léopold Senghor however, Lamine Senghor has not gained much recognition in the historiography of decolonization or post-colonial Africa. Indeed, Léopold Senghor – the poet, co-founder of the Négritude movement and first president of the Republic of Senegal – is a much more recognized figure in African literary and political scene, due in part also to the fact that he died in 2001 at the respectable age of 95. On the other hand, Lamine Senghor had a very brief and fiery brand of anti-imperialism which was located primarily in France during the interwar period. Although his time on the European anti-imperial stage was brief—barely lasting from his testimony as a witness in the Blaise Diagne–*Les Continents* trial in 1924 to his untimely death three years later— Lamine Senghor became one of the most prominent figures of the period and a headliner at the 1927 Brussels congress of the League Against Imperialism, where he was elected to the League's executive committee.

Born in Senegal in 1889, Lamine Senghor was conscripted by French colonial authorities to serve in the 68th Battalion of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais[12] from 1916 to 1919.[13] His contingent suffered a mustard gas attack in Verdun in 1917, which damaged his lungs. He would succumb to tuberculosis a decade later, at the age of 38. Following his injury during the war, the French authorities promoted him to the rank of sergeant. He was also awarded the Croix de Guerre and granted French citizenship for his service.[14] After the war, as a disillusioned and wounded war veteran—a "*mutilé de guerre*," as he referred to himself—Senghor joined the French Communist Party (PCF), which connected anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, through the Union Intercontinentale (UIC), an outfit of the PCF's Colonial Studies Committee. These were the circles in which both the young Nguyen Ai Quoc (later known as Ho Chi Minh) and Lamine Senghor collaborated. The journal *Le Paria*, where Nguyen Ai Quoc was editor and Senghor a writer, published "the most violent denunciations of empire of the period, [as] communism was the sole metropolitan movement of the mid-1920s to call for the independence of the colonies."[15]

Yet, Senghor later realized that the French Communist Party did not offer enough space for anti-colonial struggle, as he also became increasingly aware of serving as a *faire-valoir* (a token figure) for the party.[16] This disillusionment would lead him to create his own organization, the Comité de Defense de la Race Nègre (CDRN) in March 1926. In the January 1927 issue of the CDRN's journal *La Voix des Nègres*, Senghor stated that his new organization would fight

against “the unique author of universal misery: international imperialism.” He then lists the objectives of the organization as, one, fighting against racial hatred [*la haine de race*]; two, working towards social emancipation of the Black race; three, fighting against and dismantling the oppressive system against the Black race in the colonies and all other races; and four, networking with organizations truly fighting for the liberation of all oppressed peoples and for world revolution.[17] That the vibrancy of the anti-imperial and communist coaltion in the interwar period found a fertile ground in Paris (despite the repression by the French government) was no coincidence.

An Anti-Colonial and Transracial Coalition

Interwar war Paris was a veritable “anti-imperial metropolis” thanks to the global influx of conscripted soldiers and workers from the various corners of the empire who had come to the rescue of France during the Great War.[18] War veterans such as Lamine Senghor and the Algerian Messali Hadj, Indochinese and Malagasy tirailleurs, workers and students, joined forces with segments of the French Left and communist circles to form an anti-imperial front. During that interwar window, pivotal moments such as the 1919 Paris conference which settled to the post-World War I order, the 1925 Rif War, and the 1935 Italian aggression against Ethiopia provided the impetus for transracial radical solidarity, anti-imperialism, and revolutionary politics.

In interwar metropolitan France, the communist agenda, and especially its anti-imperialist wing, had the potential to federate a large transracial coalition drawn from across the empire. The Commission Coloniale of the PCF was especially of concern to the French state, which put in place a sophisticated net of surveillance and intelligence gathering by infiltrating the anti-imperial circles. Agent Desiré—an especially prolific informant for the intelligence services of the Ministry of Colonies (the euphemistically named Service de Contrôle et d’Assistance des Indigenes des Colonies en France, CAI)[19]—listed PCF’s Commision Coloniale leaders as the Algerians Mahmoud Ben Lekhal and Hadjali Abdelkader (who co-founded with Messali Hadj in 1926 *l’Etoile Nord-Africaine*), the Guadeloupean lawyer Max Bloncourt, the Senegalese Lamine Senghor, the Vietnamese Vo Thanh Long, and the future member of the French parliament Henri Lozeray.[20] The diversity of this leadership group is telling. As such, the communist anti-

imperialist agenda in the metropole had the potential to facilitate an alliance between Africans (including Maghrebis), West Indians, and Indochinese, alongside French leftists.

On April 14, 1926, at the headquarters of the French Communist Party (PCF), a meeting of the Commission Coloniale brought together Nguyen The Truyen, Vo Thanh Long, Ben Lekhal, Hadjali Abdelkader, and the Guadeloupean Stephane Rosso. During the meeting, Nguyen The Truyen expressed his excitement that the comrade Lagrosillière had just returned from Guadeloupe with "interesting and fresh news" that could be published in *Le Paria*.[21] During a subsequent meeting two days later (attended by Bloncourt, Saint-Jacques, Ben Lekhal, Sadoun, Rosso, Nguyen The Truen, and Vo Than Long), the members decided that Bloncourt, as secretary general of the Union Intercontinentale, would take charge of *Le Paria*, assisted by Hadjali and Saint-Jacques.[22]

The communist appeal of the Union Intercontinentale (UIC) did not, however, resonate among all the activists from the colonial world. Some of the members of this group, elsewhere referred to as the *indigènes bolchevisants* (the Bolshevik-aspiring natives)[23] by the intelligence services of the Ministry of Colonies, would later gradually distance themselves from the UIC and the Communist Party. In a move to maintain the coalition, Bloncourt proposed the creation of sections of the UIC for North Africans, one for West Indians, and one for the Indochinese. He believed such a move made sense especially because about 50 "North African Arabs" had agreed to join UIC.[24]

Still, the transracial and interconnected struggles of the West Africans, North Africans, Levantine, Indochinese, and Antillans, are discernable. For instance, the idea of a fundraiser to help the "Chinese strikers" was proposed at the July 1, 1925 meeting. Funds were collected "for the poor Algerians living in France," and Nguyen The Truyen and Vo Thanh Long contributed 2 francs each.[25] These examples point to a broad attempt, in the words of the CAI intelligence services, to build a coalition with "all the revolutionary organizations of the Oriental natives."[26] As the CAI's Agent Desiré notes, "through the *Annamites* [Vietnamese] Nguyen-The-Truyen and Tran-Xuan-Ho, [the UIC] is in a close relationship with the *Franco-Chinois* group of Garenne-Colombes. For some time now, they are collaborating for an active propaganda campaign wit

the *Comité Pro-Hindou.*"[27] Nguyen The Truyen was the founder of the Vietnamese Independence Party (*Parti Annamite d'Independance*, PAI) in 1926 and a former comrade of Nguyen Ai Quoc.[28] Ben Lekhal was the liaison between the Comité Pro-Hindou and the UIC, serving as the first secretary of the former and a member of the bureau of the latter.[29]

Examples of the transracial, transnational, and anti-imperialist nature of the coaltion abound. For example, on 5 December 1926, about a hundred "Indochinese, Blacks, North Africans, and Europeans" gathered at a meeting organized by the "Phuoc-Quoc Commmittee." During the event, the Indochinese painted a "*tableau noir*" of the suffering of their people at the hands of the French colonialism, which treated them like a "vile horde" [*un vil troupeau*]. Speaking on behalf of the CDRN, Lunion Gothon assured the Indochinese that "all the Blacks were with them" and shared a smilar fate as "*coloniaux.*" Along the same line, the Algerian Hadjali Abdelkader called for a union of all *coloniaux*.[30]

Following the Brussels conference, the French section of the League Against Imperialism held an event on April 27, 1927 to explain the objectives of the organization. Here also we see clearly the transnational coalition against colonial oppression in display. The meeting, presided over by the French philosopher and anticolonial activist Professor Felicien Challaye, brought together some "600 people, including many Chinese, Indochinese, Negroes, Malagasy, and Algerians." At the event, a Syrian activist denounced the imperial "dismembering" of Syria into the three states of Irak, Syria, and Palestine. The French Mandate of Syria, he said, is "a monstruous injustice" [*une monstrueuse iniquité*]. An Indochinese speaker accused France of poisoning Indochina with alcohol and opium, and denounced the forced labor regime and the exportation of laborers to New Caledonia for rubber harvesting.[31] Chedli Ben Mustapha, a member of the Tunisian political party *Destour* and *l'Etoile Nord Africaine*, declared: "French imperialism pretended to bring civilization to Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. For that, they first sent their soldiers to massacre thousands of the natives. After the soldier, came the colonizer, who seized all the land from the tribes. Then the tribes were forced to become nomadic…" He also lamented that Tunisians were conscripted to wage war against "their Riffian brothers." He then called "all North African natives to form a bond of brotherhood with the Riffians" [*fraternisez avec les Rifains*].[32] Active

brotherhood [*fraternisation*] was also Lamine Senghor's call in favor of the Indochinese from "all the Blacks that are being conscripted and sent to [Indochina]."[33]

The Rif War

The Rif War (1921–1926) was indeed a rallying cry for anti-colonial activism and transracial solidarity in metropolitan France during the interwar period. Abd el-Krim founded the Republic of Rif. Having defeated the Spanish army on July 22, 1921, he became an anti-imperial icon. Mao and Ho Chi Minh would cite his guerrilla tactics and he was featured in the front cover of Time magazine in 1925.[34] As they defeated the Spanish army, the Riffians posed a threat to the French imperial interests in North Africa. The French thus initially responded with border incursions in the Rif and imposed an economic blockade. By April 1925, the Republic of Rif (with a population of only 750,000 people) was at war against both France and Spain.[35] In the metropole, the war became a nodal point in Frech politics and gave rise a a broad movement against the war, especially within the French leftists, to varying degrees.

The 1924 campaign against the Rif war coincided with the bolshevization turn in French communist circles.[36] Bolshevization refers to, following the 5th congress of the Comintern, the push towards the adoption of the Russian communist party model and the appointment of leaders from the labor movement to the party's leadership. Between May and October 1925, the French Communist Party led a direct campaign against the Rif war, "organizing hundreds of meetings and demonstrations, instigating mutinies on half a dozen naval vessels and making several attempts to stop shipments of troops and materiel."[37] They were joined in their condemnation of the Rif war by leaders and anti-imperial activists from various corners of the empire. In the UIC circles, the *Comité central d'action coloniale contre la guerre du Maroc, la vie chère et les impôts Caillaux* [the anti-colonial central committee against the war in Morocco, the high cost of living and the Caillaux taxes][38] was comprised of Ben Lekhal, Ali, Hadjali, Bloncourt, and Senghor.[39]

On 16 May 1925, the French Communist Party organized a rally at Luna Park in Paris, which brought together thousands of people. The attendees included "a thousand Arabs, about 20

Blacks, including two Senegalese [people], a few Annamites [Vietnamese]…, some Chinese [people], and Indians."[40] During the rally, the Algerian Ben Lekhal spoke in Arabic and then in French, appealing to "French workers to protest, with utmost energy, against the war in Morocco."[41] In his speech, Jacques Doriot, the leader of the French communist youth, pointed out the Rif war and the Druze rebellion in Syria as evidence of the bankrupted French colonial colonial rule over Muslim societies.[42]

The protests against the Rif war reached their climax on 12 October 1925, when "several hundred thousand French workers took to the streets in a twenty-four hour general strike." The strike forced the Minister of Interior to decree a state of siege for Paris on that day.[43] *L'Humanité* put the number of strikers at 900,000, but most historians estimate that it was probably closer to 400,000 strikers.[44] Following the strike, the repression by the state and the patronat was swift, with hundreds of arrests, including that of Jacques Doriot himself.[45]

It was Jacques Doriot, as a young member of the Parliament and leader of the *Federation des Jeunesses Communistes* who heralded the campaign against the French war in Rif at the parliament.[46] The communists sought to build a broader anti-Rif war coalition with the socialists (SFIO) and the confederation of workers unions (CGT). In the French parliament, the socialist critique of the Rif war revolved, however, mostly around the failure of the government to keep the public informed of the campaign.[47] Still, the reverberations of the Rif war in French politics were nothing short of institutional instability. The new government of Prime Minister Paul Painlevé survived three votes of no confidence between late May and June 1925 over its conduct of the war. He survived the no confidence votes only because a majority of the SFIO deputies did not join the Communists in opposing the government.[48]

In any case, for the majority of the French workers and society at large, the calls for *fraternization* with the Riffians and for the French to leave Morocco altogether were far-fetched.[49] As such, the PCF campaign against the Rif war did not achieve the broad support it would require from the French working class. A certain disconnect between the PCF leadership and the wider segments of society was visible. In the colonies also, the PCF had a very limited

presence, having established sections only in Indochina, Tunisia, and Algeria, while being banned in Morocco for instance.

In the end, the PCF leadership – unlike the *Federation des Jeunesses Communistes* lead by Doriot – emphasized anti-militarism rather than anti-imperialism.[50] For his part, Doriot sought to strengthen the anti-imperialst dimension of the campaign against the Rif war by sending a telegram of support to Abd el-Krim on September 11, 1924. In the message, Doriot expressed that Riffians would continue their fight until "Moroccan soil was completely liberated" from both Spanish and French colonial domination.[51] As Doriot argued, the Rif Republic, "[while] not socialist,…was anti-imperialist, opposed French capitalism, and was therefore the natural ally of the French working class."[52]

Meanwhile, Lamine Senghor "denounced…the sending of Senegalese troops to Morocco… where [France] obligates [them] to dirty their hands with the blood of their Riffian brothers." Indeed, France made an extensive use of conscripted soldiers from the empire in their colonial wars. In the interwar period and following World War II, the *tirailleurs senegalais* became for instance permanent occupying forces and guardians of empire not only in North Africa and the Levant, but also Indochina, and Madagascar.[53] Those conscripted soldiers were not only pivotal in the defense and liberation of France during the world wars, but also in colonial wars in the far flung corners of the empire. As a former tirailleur (in the Great War) himself, Senghor spoke adamamntly against the use of the soldiers of empire to quell anti-colonial rebellions and wars of liberation. As such, at the rally in Luna Park discussed above, Senghor also condemned French imperialism "that makes the Muslims and Arabs believe that the Riffians are their enemies, just like in 1914 when it made French workers believe that the German workers were their enemies."[54] In an appeal for transracial solidarity, Senghor expressed "to his Arab brothers and his brothers from the Metropole the brotherhood of all peoples without any racial or color distinction."[55]

Two years later, during his speech at the Brussels conference, Senghor referenced the connected struggles against colonial domination. "They murdered our brothers" he said, "in the first war in Morocco, the Great War, in the Rif and Syria, in Madagascar and Indonesia."[56] During his y

of anticolonial activism and through the organizations that he led, Senghor also denounced French duplicity in the treatment of the African *mutilés de guerre* compared to their French counterparts. His organization, the CDRN, pleaded for equal treatment of African, Malagasy, and Indochinese *tirailleurs* and *mutilés de guerre* and their French counterparts regarding the amount of their pensions.[57] Senghor also attended a ceremony organized by the local sections of the CDRN at the Gallieni cemetery in Fréjus[58] to pay homage to fellow Senegalese, Malagasy, and Vietnamese soldiers.

Conclusion

In revisiting the interwar period in the imperial metropoles, we clearly see episodes of transnational and transracial coalition building and the merging of anti-imperial and anti-capitalist agendas. This was made possible in no small part by the convergence of workers, students, and conscripted soldiers from the far reaches of the empire in European capitals and by their experience of working together with communist and leftist circles. The interconnected struggles of all these activists and anti-imperial leaders from the many corners of the empire resonated in part due to the ongoing rebellions and wars of liberation at the time, including the Rif war. For the French colonial state, such transracial and transnational coalitions posed a significant threat to the future of a waning empire, since governing races, honor, and prestige became central to preserving and restoring the nation's grandeur, especially after the world wars.

Endnotes

[1] Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, however, did attend the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where he argued that Wilson's principles of self-determination ought to also apply to Africans. See Katy Harsant, *Selective Responsibility in the United Nations: Colonial Histories and Critical Inquiry* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), p. 50.
[2] Harsant, *Selective Responsibility in the United Nations,* 5. See also Randolph B. Persaud, "The Racial Dynamic in International Relations: Some Thoughts on the Pan-African Antecedents of Bandung," in *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions*, eds. Quỳnh N. Phạm and Robbie Shilliam (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).
[3] Lewis Twiby, "The League Against Imperialism: Interwar Anti-Colonial Internationalism," *Retrospect Journal* (2020).
[4] Michele Louro, Carolien Stolte, and Sana Tannoury-Karam, "The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives," in *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives*, eds. Michele Louro, Carolien Stolte, and

Tannoury-Karam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 17. For a list of the organizations and delegates that attended the 1927 Brussels congress see LAI Archives ARCH 00804. 2, IISH.

[5] See "Liste des organisations et Delegues ayant apporte leur concours au Congres international de Bruxelles" *La Voix des Nègres*, March 1927, CAOM SLOTFOM

[6] Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's Historyof the Third World*. The New Press, pp. 21-22

[7] LAI Archives, ARCH00804.1, IISH.

[8] LAI, 1931.

[9] "Condamnation de l'Impérialisme et de la colonisation," *La Voix des Nègres*, March 1927, CAOM SLOTFOM V 3. The materials from the French Archives (Archives Nationales de France and Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer) are in French and the English quotes are the author's translation.

[10] "Discours de Bloncourt," *La Voix des Nègres*, March 1927, CAOM SLOTFOM V 3. Note that this statement was made two decades before India became independent.

[11] David Murphy, "Defending the 'Negro Race': Lamine Senghor and Black Internationalism in Interwar France," *French Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 162.

[12] The Tirailleurs Sénégalais (Senegalese infantrymen) fought in both world wars, but also in other colonial wars in the French empire. The first battalion of Tirailleurs Sénégalais was formed by the French governor Louis Faidherbe in 1857 in Saint-Louis du Senegal.

[13] Bakary Diallo and Lamine Senghor, *White War, Black Soldiers: Two African Accounts of World War I*, ed. George Robb (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2021), 4. On the history of the *tirailleurs*, see for instance Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[14] Diallo and Senghor, *White War, Black Soldiers*, 4–5.

[15] Murphy, "Defending the 'Negro Race'," 164.

[16] Hargreaves 1993, 261, cited in Murphy "Defending the 'Negro Race'," 166. Note that three decades later, another figure of the anti-colonial struggle, Aimé Césaire, would also leave the French Communist Party. In addition to the PCF's refusal to reject Stalinism, Césaire found that the Party did not provide adequate room for the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle.

[17] Senghor 1927, "Ce qu'est notre comité de défense de la race nègre", *La Voix des Nègres*, Janvier 1927, CAOM SLOTFOM V 3.

[18] Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

[19] On CAI, see for instance, Vincent Bollenot, *Maintenir l'ordre impérial en métropole: le service de contrôle et d'assistance en France des indigènes des colonies (1915–1945*). Histoire. (Université Panthéon-Sorbonne - Paris I, 2022).

[20] "Note de l'Agent Desiré du 26 Septembre 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV 282.

[21] "Note de l'Agent Desiré du 14 Avril 1926", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV 282.

[22] Note de l'Agent Desiré du 16 Avril 1926" Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV 282.

[23] Note du Service de renseignements du 1er Mai 1926", CAI, Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV282.

[24] Ibid.

[25] "Note de l'Agent Desiré du 1er Juillet 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV282.

[26] Note de l'Agent Desiré du 28 Avril 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV282.

[27] Ibid. On the Comité Pro-Hindou or pro-India Committee, see for instance Henri Barbusse, "The Roy Case: A Protest," *The Labour Monthly* 7, no. 3 (1925): 294–297. Available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/barbusse/1925/05/x01.htm. On the British Indian subjects living in Paris in the interwar period and leading an anti-imperial campaign, see K. Marsh, "'The Only Safe Haven of Refuge in All the World': Paris, Indian 'Revolutionaries' and Imperial Rivalry, c. 1905–40," *French Cultural Studies* 30, no. 3 (2019): 196–219.

[28] Kim Khánh Huỳnh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). 192.

[29] Note de l'Agent Desiré du 26 Avril 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV282; Note de l'Agent Desiré du 28 Avril 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV282.

[30] "Note de l'Agent Desire du 6 Decembre 1926" FR CAOM SLOTFOM III 37-38

[31] "Meeting organize par la Ligue contre l'oppression colonial et l'imperialisme- Salle des societes savants 8 ru danton, le 26 Avril" 27 Avril 1927. FR CAOM SLOTFOM IX 11

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Thomas Graham, "A Century Ago, a Showdown Changed but Didn't End North Africa Colonialism" New Lines Magazine, 2022. Available at https://newlinesmag.com/essays/a-century-ago-a-showdown-changed-but-didnt-end-north-africa-colonialism/
[35] David H. Slavin, "The French Left and the Rif War, 1924-25: Racism, and the limits of Internationalism." *Journal of Contemporay History* 26, no 2 (1991): 5-6
[36] Poggioli 2020, p. 79.
[37] Ibid.
[38] *Les impots Caillaux* refer to income taxes that were introduced by then Minister of Finance Joseph Caillaux.
[39] "Note de l'Agent Desiré du 26 Septembre 1925" Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV282.
[40] "Note de l'Agent Desiré du 20 Mai 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV 282.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Martin Thomas, *The French empire between the wars: Imperialism, politics and society*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)
[43] Slavin, "The French Left and the Rif War," 6
[44] Morgan Poggioli, "La campagne française contre la guerre du Maroc ou le difficile apprentissage de la bolchevisation (1924-1926)." *Le Mouvement Social*, No 272, Les naissances du communuisme en France (1915-1925). 2020, pp. 59-80, at 74
[45] Ibid.
[46] Note that Doriot would later become a fascist, and joined the Nazi military during World War II.
[47] Thomas, *The French Empire between The Wars*, 216
[48] Ibid.
[49] Poggioli "La campagne française contre la guerre du Maroc", 61
[50] Slavin, "The French Left and the Rif War,"7
[51] Ibid., 10
[52] Ibid., 17
[53] See Sarah Zimmerman, *Living Beyond Boundaries: West African Servicemen in French Colonial Conflicts, 1908-1962*, (PhD Dissertation, University of California Berkley, 2011)
[54] "Note de l'Agent Desiré du 20 Mai 1925", Folder 110, CAOM SLOTFOM XV 282.
[55] Ibid
[56] "Discours de Senghor," *La Voix des Nègres*, March 1927, CAOM SLOTFOM V 3.
[57] Whereas a French *mutilé de guerre* would receive a yearly pension of 15,390 francs, his African counterpart of the same rank would receive only 1,800 francs. *La Voix des Nègres*, Janvier 1927, CAOM SLOTFOM V 3.
[58] Senghor died on November 25, 1927 in the military garrison town of Fréjus. Fréjus and Saint-Rachael were sites for African soldiers to stay over the winter during the war, and thus places that brought together West African, Malagasy, and Southeast Asian soldiers and workers. Gregory Mann, "Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2005): 425–34.

Islam and the Struggle for National Identity in Mauritania: Mediating Arabo-African Divides?

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Introduction

When Mauritania gained independence on November 28, 1960, it stood apart from its West and North African neighbors, with the sharp division between its Arab and African populations. Two competing nationalist forces at the domestic level pulled the country into two different directions: Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab World. Officially, Mauritania positioned itself as a link (*trait d'union*) between these regions, a status reinforced by its geography, history, and demographic composition (Balans, 1975).

Islam has played a central role in mediating this duality. As a shared faith among all Mauritanian communities and the official religion of the state, Islam has often been framed as a national unifying force, compensating for differences in language, ethnicity, and culture. The inclusion of "Islamic" in the country's official name reflects this aspiration. Mauritania's constitution defines its people as "Muslim, Arab, and African," an acknowledgment of the intersection between Arab and

African identities through Islam.[1] Although the division between an Arabic-influenced Bidān[2] culture and an African cultural identity[3] predates colonial rule, these identities were redefined and reshaped during the colonial period, with language emerging as a key marker of identity—largely through the colonial education system that produced the country's political elites.[4]

Yet, despite the state's official commitment to the discourse of 'national unity' - which in the Mauritanian context denotes an inclusive identity encompassing both Arab and non-Arab populations - its policies have not consistently reflected this vision. Since at least 1966—just six years after independence—Mauritania's non-Arabic-speaking communities of Haalpulaaren, Soninké, and Wolof (commonly referred to in Mauritanian intellectual discourse as Afro-Mauritanians, a term I will use hereafter for lack of a better one), have protested marginalization. Successive governments have prioritized the Arabic-speaking Bidān elite, reinforcing an Arabic-dominant national identity that sidelines the African dimension of the country's heritage.

Language policies, citizenship rights, and political representation remain highly contested issues, driving ongoing debates over national belonging. This article traces the historical roots of these identity tensions, examining both Mauritania's domestic politics and its international relations. It argues that the country's post-independence political trajectory—particularly its alignment with

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[1] The Preamble states the following:

> United throughout history, by shared moral and spiritual values and aspiring to a common future, the Mauritanian People recognize and proclaim their cultural diversity, base of national unity and of social cohesion, and its corollary, the right to be different [à la difference]. The Arabic language, official language of the country and the other national languages, the Poular, the Soninké and the Wolof, constitute, each in itself, a national common patrimony to all Mauritanians that the State must, in the name of all, preserve and promote.
>
> Conscious of the necessity of strengthening the ties with [their] brother peoples, the Mauritanian people, Muslim people, Arab and African, proclaim that they will work for the realization of the unity of the Grand Maghreb, of the Arab Nation and of Africa and for the consolidation of peace in the world. ("Mauritania's Constitution," 2014).

[2] The term "Arabo-Berber" is commonly used in Western writings on Mauritania to describe the tribes that make up this community, which are often a mix of Arabs and Berbers. While this description is generally accurate, it is important to note that, to my knowledge, no tribe publicly identifies as Berber. I prefer to use the term "Bidān," as this is the term that these people use to refer to themselves, regardless of their origin.

[3] In Mauritania, Arabness is primarily defined by the Arabic language, as many who are today identified as Arabs are in fact Arabized Berbers. The term "African," by contrast, is commonly used to refer to Wolof, Pulaar, and Soninké communities.

[4] In another work, I have shown how these ethnic and racial identities had been redefined during the colonial period. See Baba Adou, "Racializing Arabic: Colonial Education Policies and the Linguistic Issue in Contemporary Mauritania," *Race Politics and Colonial Legacies: France, Africa and the Middle East*, 2024, 7.

the Arab world at the expense of its West African connections—has largely shaped internal struggles over identity during a critical period of its history. While Islam has often been and remains a potential force for national cohesion, successive governments have not always mobilized it toward that end. At the same time, Islam itself has remained a contested space, serving as both a unifying framework and a tool leveraged by both the state and its challengers.

The Mauritanian case highlights the complexities faced by frontier states straddling the Arab world and Africa in forging a unified national identity that transcends racial and ethnic divisions. Unlike pre-partition Sudan - where Arabization and Islamization were deeply intertwined, creating two irreconcilable national visions - and South Sudan, where the non-Arab community's religious distinctiveness shapes its sociopolitical identity and perception of others, Islam in Mauritania is generally perceived as a unifying force (Deng, 2011; Tounsel, 2021). This is largely due to the country's relatively homogeneous religious landscape, characterized by the dominance of the Maliki school of jurisprudence and deeply rooted Sufi traditions. Afro-Mauritanians and Haratin are as Muslim as their Bidān counterparts, making religion a potential bridge rather than a dividing line. I begin the essay by examining the historical trajectory of the state's management of Arabo-African relations, both domestically and internationally, and the political implications of Mauritania's alignment with the Arab world. I then explore the role of Islam in the national project, analyzing its intersection with debates on Arabization, slavery, and national unity.

Navigating domestic and international Arabo-African relations

In the 1950s, particularly in the years leading up to independence, Mauritania's political elites were divided over the future of the still-French colony. In this respect, Mauritania differed from some other African countries, where a strong nationalist movement was pushing for independence. Several political factions attended the historic Aleg Conference, where the country's political future was debated and decided (El Amir, 2020).

The first group, represented by the *Union Progressiste de Mauritanie*, advocated for continued association with the French community and even made General De Gaulle an honorary president of the party (Baduel, 1994). A second faction, represented by the Bloc Démocratique du Gorgol,

favored closer ties with West Africa, particularly the Federation of Mali, which was a short-lived alliance between Senegal and Mali dissolved in August 1960 (Baduel, 1994; Gandolfi, 1960). A third group, led by Horma Ould Babana of the *Entente Mauritanienne*, pushed for Mauritania's integration into Moroccan Kingdom (El Amir, 2020). Ould Babana had served as Mauritania's first deputy in France's National Assembly (Moore, 1965). However, allegiance to the *Fédération du Mali* did not always correspond to ethnicity. As Moktar Ould Daddah, the first president of independent Mauritania, explains in his autobiography, key members of the Mauritanian National Assembly, particularly from the Bidān community and backed by traditional Bidān chiefs, entertained the idea of joining the new Federation.[5]

Mauritania, like most French colonies, was ultimately granted independence, but these political disagreements significantly influenced the country's identity post-independence. Ould Daddah writes in his autobiography that the country could only truly succeed as a state if it embraced both its Arab and African identities, given its complex demographic composition. Mauritania, he argued, can only fulfill itself and endure by becoming an active link (*trait d'union*) between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa (Daddah, 2003). Such a vision, he argued, could only be realized through a "unified Mauritania in a unified Africa," with Islam playing a central place in fostering this unity. Yet, as Ould Daddah himself acknowledged, the country found itself walking a tightrope, lacking the political and institutional capacity to fully support its proclaimed vision of national unity—one rooted in dual belonging to both Africa and the Arab world (Daddah, 2003).

Domestic Implications for looking northward

Despite its early aspirations to serve as a bridge between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world, Mauritania faced significant challenges in fully integrating into the Arab world and joining the Arab League (Daddah, 2003). A major obstacle was Morocco, which laid claim to Mauritania until the two countries normalized relations in late 1960s. When Mauritania was admitted to the United Nations on October 27, 1961, only Tunisia among the Arab states supported the UN resolution

[5] Ould Daddah even threatened to resign from his position as head of pre-independence government if the assembly decided to join the Federation. See Mokhtar Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie Contre Vents et Marées* (Karthala Editions, 2003).

(United Nations, 1961). Nevertheless, the Mauritanian state’s emotional attachment since the early years of independence was firmly with the Arab world, as the discussion below illustrates.

At the second annual meeting of the African and Malagasy Union (AMU) in March 1961 in Tananarive, Ould Daddah faced an embarrassing response from his counterparts after attempting to promote off-the-agenda Arab causes, such as those of Algeria, Tunisia, and Palestine. By this point, Ould Dadah's affinity for the Arab world was well-known. One leader at the meeting confronted him bluntly: “You are struggling to get your country admitted to the U.N., and yet you want to antagonize your greatest supporter, France! You are disrupting our debates with these issues concerning your Arab cousins, who, by the way, support Morocco against you (Daddah, 2003, p. 246)!”

Five years later, Mauritania would withdraw from this Francophone club it had co-founded, a move that had been interpreted as part of the country's growing alignment with the Arab world. Ould Daddah was the sole leader to strongly oppose the admission of Congo-Leopoldville to the African and Malagasy Union. On the eve of the Nouakchott summit in February 1965, of what then became the Afro-Malagasy Union for Economic Cooperation, Ould Daddah ordered the immediate expulsion of two special envoys sent by Moïse Tshombé of Belgian Congo, who had arrived as observers from their government. The following day, Ould Dadah’s peers sharply criticized this decision, with one remarking, "We are not in Cairo," referring to a similar 1964 incident in which Tshombé attempted to force his way into a meeting of the Organization of African Unity held in Cairo. President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was sympathetic to Patrice Lumumba, placed Tshombé under surveillance until his departure (Daddah, 2003).

When the leaders of the Afro-Malagasy Union voted to admit Congo-Léopoldville during a meeting on May 26, 1965—which Mauritania did not attend—Ould Daddah responded by withdrawing Mauritania from the organization (Daddah, 2003). This decision marked a significant shift in Mauritania’s relations with its Francophone West African neighbors. Mauritania’s opposition to Congo-Léopoldville’s admission was widely interpreted as a reflection of Ould Daddah’s alignment with the Arab world, which was generally sympathetic to Lumumba and opposed to the new Congolese state.

Mauritania joined the Arab League in November 1973, a decision that Mauritanian leaders celebrated and hailed as a diplomatic success. However, the admission to the Arab League was viewed differently at the domestic level. For Afro-Mauritanians, it was seen as another step towards 'Arabization' and the marginalization of non-Arabic-speaking elites (Diaw, 1999). For some Bidān elites, it represented another victory in the ongoing domestic political battles over the country's state identity. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hamdi Ould Mouknas, explained the delayed entry of Mauritania into the Arab League by saying, "Colonization had integrated us into West Africa, despite our Arab culture. Arab countries were likely unaware of what Mauritania truly represented. Fortunately, all of that is in the past: today, we are an active member of the Arab League (Diaw, 1999, p. 142)." It is worth noting, though, that Mauritania's integration in West Africa was not solely a colonial decision. Pilgrims from *Chinguetti*, the historical name associated of much of modern-day Mauritania, did not always find easy acceptance within the Maghreb. Two notable incidents—one in the 18th century and another in the late 19th century—underscore this contested identity. In both cases, debates arose over whether Mauritanian pilgrims were eligible to benefit from Maghrebi Islamic endowments in Mecca and Medina. Opponents argued that Chinguetti, or Mauritania, belonged not to the Maghreb, but rather to the *Sudan*, or what is now considered West Africa (Ash-Shinqiti, 2002, p. 432-434).

In the 1980s, under the regime of Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (in office 1984-2005), Mauritania's international relations saw further rapprochement with the Arab world and North Africa, coupled with a growing distance from its West African neighbors. These international shifts were in tandem with significant domestic developments that marked some of the most critical stages in Arabo-African relations in the country. Aid from Arab donor countries—through the establishment of cultural centers, libraries, institutes, and scholarship, internship, and training programs primarily benefiting Arabic-speaking citizens—exacerbated intercommunal tensions (Sow, 2003). The years between 1986 and 1991 could be considered a dark period in Mauritanian history, marked by intercommunal tensions and state repression of Afro-Mauritanian communities, particularly the Haalpulaaren. These events gave rise to what is known in Mauritania's political lexicon as *le passif humanitaire* (in French), *al-irth al-insani* (in Arabic), or the "national question,"

referring to the social and political consequences of state-sponsored repressive policies toward Afro-Mauritanians and the challenges of addressing them.

It was in this atmosphere that the *African Liberation Forces of Mauritania* (FLAM) was created with the goal of achieving racial equality, the end of Arabization, and a fair distribution of power between Bidān and Afro-Mauritanians (Baduel, 1994). In 1986, FLAM published the now-famous *Manifeste du Négro-Mauritanien opprimé* (The Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian), a political pamphlet that was highly critical of the political status quo (N'Diaye, 2017). Following its publication, several Afro-Mauritanian activists and intellectuals were arrested, tortured, and many ultimately died in prison (Jourde, 2001). An alleged coup attempt by officers linked to FLAM further exacerbated tensions, leading to widespread purges of Afro-Mauritanian civil servants from the administration, the deportation of thousands—primarily Haalpularen—to neighboring Senegal and Mali, and the execution of approximately 500 officers (Sow, 2003; Joure, 2001).

In early 1989, Ould Taya co-founded the Arab Maghreb Union (U.M.A.) alongside leaders of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. This move reinforced Mauritania's integration into the Arab world and deepened resentment among black Mauritanians (Pazzanita, 1992). At the same time, growing domestic racial tensions, coupled with diplomatic disputes with neighboring Senegal, escalated into violent clashes between the two countries. In April 1989, border clashes in the Senegal River valley escalated into widespread violence, with riots erupting in both countries. Mauritanians in Senegal and Senegalese in Mauritania became targets of mob violence. In Mauritania, victims were not only Senegalese citizens but also Afro-Mauritanians (Pazzanita, 1992).

Another diplomatic shift, widely perceived domestically as further distancing Mauritania from its African ties, was the country's withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in December 2000. As a co-founder and key member, Mauritania had played an integral role in the organization (N'Diaye, 2017). The official justification for this move was ECOWAS's plans to adopt a common currency. Following its exit, Mauritania requested that the African Union reclassify it within the North African region rather than West Africa (N'Diaye, 2017). While these moves were not reversed, Mauritania gradually improved its relations

African neighbors in the 2000s, particularly after the failure of the Maghreb Union and the ousting of Ould Taya's long-standing regime in 2005.

Islam as a foundation for national unity in Mauritania

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania stands out as an exception in both the Sahel and Maghreb regions due to the explicit Islamic label attached to the state. Successive Mauritanian rulers have invoked this Islamic identity—albeit to varying degrees—to manage internal divisions and political rivalries. After the racial tensions of 1966 surrounding Arabization, Ould Daddah recounts in his autobiography that the government dispatched missions to various regions in an effort to ease the unrest. In one such meeting, Ould Daddah quotes a 'wise elder' from Gorgol:

> All these matters are the concerns of young intellectuals; we, the elders, do not understand them. We, the farmers of the River Valley, have always coexisted with the Bidān [les Maures]. Sometimes, we argue over the destruction caused in our fields by their livestock or over the priority of using a water source. In such cases, we always manage to settle our disputes amicably. But most of the time, we maintain a harmonious coexistence, trading our goods and supporting one another. After all, we are brothers in Islam (Daddh, 2003, p. 353)!

As Ould Ahmed Salem argues, the designation of Mauritania as an Islamic Republic was primarily a political decision aimed at unifying an ethnically diverse country, rather than a genuine commitment by the ruling elites to the Islamization of the state (Salem, 2013). This is evident in the writings of Ould Daddah, who clarifies this point on multiple occasions in his autobiography. For instance, during a visit to Egypt to seek recognition for the newly independent nation, President Gamal Abdel Nasser questioned why Mauritania had not retained the name Chinguetti, which was well known in the Arab Mashreq. In response, Ould Daddah explained that the label *Islamic Republic* was deliberately chosen to reflect an essential aspect of national identity. According to Ould Daddah, this designation encapsulated the defining characteristic of the Mauritanian people, who are entirely Muslim. It is the only commonality shared by all Mauritanians, regardless of racial or ethnic differences (Daddah, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is evident that although the Islamic Republic was not initially conceived as a state project, it ultimately became a defining feature of the state. A critical juncture in this process, beyond the official designation of the country as *Islamic*, was the implementation of Sharia by former President Mohamed Kouna Ould Haidala in 1982. This implementation was not limited to the short-lived period of enforcing specific Islamic punishments, such as amputation for theft or flogging for adultery. Rather, it represented a broader Islamization of the legal system and the establishment of Islam as the sole legal and normative reference, a process that continues to permeate Mauritania’s legal and political framework today. Yet, despite the state's efforts to leverage Islam, it has not been an easy task to use it as a unifying force in addressing persistent racial and ethnic crises, including issues of Arabization, slavery and the marginalization of Afro-Mauritanians.

Arabization: the language of the Qur’an?

In post-independence Mauritania, debates over language became a central battleground for defining national identity, as elites sought to shape the state’s cultural orientation through education. Religion, too, was invoked as a tool to mediate the linguistic divide. In theory, Mauritania was well positioned to serve as a bridge between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, due to its geographical location as well as its religious education and Sufi traditions. In practice, however, balancing this dual identity at the domestic level proved challenging, particularly in the realms of education and language policy. For Arabic-speaking[6] Bidān elites who inherited the state from the French, independence represented an opportunity to assert a national culture they vaguely defined as Mauritanian, yet it was heavily shaped by Arabic language and culture. This was coupled with a desire to distance the country from colonial institutions and influences, particularly the French language. Arabization was thus framed as part of a broader decolonization effort (Bedrdine, 2014). But it was also framed in religious terms. In his

[6] Unlike in other North African countries, the Berber [Zenaga] language in Mauritania is nearly extinct, surviving only in small pockets of the southern Trarza region, where only a few thousand speakers remain, and therefore does not feature prominently in national debates on language. See Baba Horma, Al-Sanhajiya fi Mauritania: Tughyan al-Toponimiya wa Inhisar al-Istikhdam: Musharaka fi Nadwa 'an Waqi' al-Amazighiya fi Shamāl Ifriqiya [“The Sanhaja Language in Mauritania: The Dominance of Toponymy and the Decline of Use: Contribution to a Seminar on the Status of the Berber Language in North Africa”], Tétouan, January 12, 2019. Accessed April 12, 2025. الصنهاجية في موريتانيا - بابا ولد حرمه - الموسوعة الشنقيطية.pdf.

autobiography, Ould Daddah justifies Arabization by highlighting the historical role of Arabic in pre-colonial Mauritania, particularly in the river valley, where it was the language of the educated Afro-Mauritanian elite. He emphasizes that Arabic was essential for religious clerics, as it provided access to religious texts and scholarly traditions. According to Ould Daddah, colonial policies deliberately distanced Afro-Mauritanian elites from Arabic, while associating it exclusively with the Bidān (Daddah, 2003). However, Arabization was met with resistance from Afro-Mauritanian elites who had benefited more from the French colonial education system, when many Bidān had shown less interest in it (N'Diaye, 2017). For Afro-Mauritanian elites, these arguments were political maneuvers designed to consolidate the influence of Arabic-speaking elites and diminish Afro-Mauritanian dominance within the administration (N'Diaye, 2017).

Bidān students educated in traditional religious schools, along with those returning from training in the Arab world—many of them aspiring to integrate into the workforce but likely excluded in the French-dominated system—played a key role in grassroots efforts for Arabization. Moustapha Ould Bedredine, a Kadihine leftist leader and former Arabic teacher who trained in Egypt for two years in 1964, recounts the mobilization for Arabization. The Arabic Teachers Syndicate, he recounted, spearheaded these efforts by rallying grassroots organizations and delegates of the Mauritanian People's Party (PPM)—the country's only legal party at the time—across the interior (excluding the Afro-Mauritanian South). During the Party's general assembly, representatives from each regional section reinforced the demand to designate Arabic as the official language (Bedrdine, 2014).

The catalyst for racial tensions related to language was not a radical Arabization policy but rather the introduction of Arabic as a mandatory subject alongside French in the school curriculum. However, Afro-Mauritanians who strongly opposed this measure saw it as the first step toward full Arabization. Following the education reform of January 1965, which made Arabic a mandatory subject for all secondary school students in Mauritania, all Afro-Mauritania students in Nouakchott and Rosso went on strike in protest of the new law. In addition, 19 Afro-Mauritania civil servants issued a manifesto rejecting the law and condemning the policy of bilingualism, which they saw as a deceptive betrayal designed to exclude Black citizens from state affairs (Daddah, 2003). The

resulting tensions between Afro-Mauritanians and Bidān escalated into clashes, leading to at least six deaths and dozens of injuries (N'Diaye, 2017).

Successive educational reforms experimented with different models to ease tensions, including the promotion of African national languages, though these efforts were still viewed as favoring the Arabic-speaking population. On the one hand, many Afro-Mauritanians felt that the government was not genuinely committed to promoting, standardizing, or officializing their native languages. On the other hand, many Afro-Mauritanian elites saw French as a unifying force that could bridge their linguistic diversity and counter the growing Arabization efforts (Diaw, 1999).

Despite this history of tension surrounding language, the government of Mauritania has yet to establish a consensus-driven language policy. For instance, In July 2022, a law reforming education sought to address these concerns by mandating the learning of one national language at the primary level for Arabic-speaking students. However, the law was contested by some Afro-Mauritanian civil society groups, particularly due to an article mandating Arabic for all students, including those from Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof backgrounds (Adou, 2023).

Official and quasi-official narratives often frame Arabic as the language of Islam and the Quran—implying that all Muslims should embrace it. Yet, such narratives have largely failed to convince many Afro-Mauritanian elites, who instead view them as an attempt to instrumentalize religion for political ends (N'Diaye, 2017). This is because the issue of language was tightly linked to larger debates on state identity and citizenship in post-independence Mauritania. Accepting the framing of Arabic dominance as essential to being a Muslim would have implications far beyond language itself.

Islam, Haratin, and Slavery

At the eve of independence, competition over political and cultural representation in the state was primarily between the Bidān and Afro-Mauritanian elites. However, by the late 1970s, another social group emerged with political claims—the Haratin. In the Mauritanian context, Haratin came to designate the dark-skinned population of mostly freed men and some individuals with sl

status (McDougall, 2020). The Haratin began to develop political self-awareness as a distinct social group towards the end of the 1970s (Salem, 2008).

One of the most profound historical turning points that led to the development of a Haratin social movement was the severe drought that ravaged the country between 1968 and 1972 (McDougall, 2020). The crisis led to the widespread loss of livestock—camels, sheep, and cattle—as well as the destruction of date-palm oases, which were primarily owned by the Bidān (McDougall, 2020). As a result, many slave and Haratin dependents found themselves abandoned, as their owners could no longer sustain them. Facing hardship, a large number migrated to urban centers, especially the capital Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and Rosso (McDougall, 2020). Despite these developments, slavery persisted in both rural and urban settings. In March 1978, a group of Haratin civil servants, teachers, and intellectuals founded *El Hor* ("The Free" in Arabic), a movement dedicated to the emancipation, equality, dignity, and well-being of the Haratin (Salem, 2008). The organization's charter invoked both the egalitarian principles of Islam and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, denouncing the various forms of domination imposed on the Haratin (Salem, 2008). Islam was, therefore, picked by this early generation of anti-slavery activists as potential source to resist continued slavery.

The issue of the Haratin was deeply intertwined with that of slavery. In response to the growing Haratin movement, the government of Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidala (in office 1980-1984) officially abolished slavery in 1981, following consultations with the ulema, who issued a fatwa arguing that the modern practice was incompatible with Islamic law (McDougall, 2005). This decision would be backed by a 2007 decree criminalizing the practice of slavery (McDougall, 2015), but the issue continues to animate political debates in the country. While the state relied on the ulema to address slavery, later generations of anti-slavery activists used religion to challenge the very foundation of the state’s alliance with religious authority. In 2012, anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid publicly burned select books of Maliki jurisprudence—texts central to Mauritania’s traditional religious education (Esseissah, 2016). Though not framed as an attack on Islam itself, the act sought to challenge religious justifications for slavery, which activists argued persisted despite its official abolition, by advocating alternative interpretations of Islam. At the same time, it asserted a competing claim to religious authority, directly contesting the st

monopoly over religious interpretation—a monopoly historically upheld by traditional centers of Islamic scholarship, which remained under Bidān control.

Conclusion

Mauritania’s "national question" manifests in language policies, citizenship rights, and political and economic inclusion, among other areas. As I have shown, Mauritania’s rulers have navigated and shaped a history fraught with racial and ethnic tensions. The alignment with the Arab world came at the expense of the country’s position within the West African community and weakened national cohesion, as Arabization policies were met with resistance from non-Arabic-speaking communities. While Islam has frequently been viewed as a potential force for national unity, successive governments have not always harnessed it for that purpose. Meanwhile, Islam itself has remained a contested domain, functioning both as a unifying framework and as a tool manipulated by the state and its challengers.

In another work, I have argued that these tensions have roots in the colonial era. French colonialism played a significant role in shaping Mauritania’s language dynamics by reinforcing the Bidān community’s self-identification as exclusively Arab, and by disrupting Afro-Mauritanians’ historical relationship with the Arabic language (Adou, 2024). The dual education policy of the colonial period, which distinguished between the country’s African and Arab-Bidān communities —exposing the former more extensively to French education—led to a civil service dominated by Afro-Mauritanians at independence.

In this essay, I argue that both colonial and postcolonial policies have coalesced to produce Mauritania’s contemporary crises of national cohesion and unity. While colonial policies in education and language laid the groundwork for these divisions, postcolonial governments have exacerbated them through misguided nation-building strategies. What is particularly striking is that the state had opportunities to address these tensions and foster a more inclusive national identity by capitalizing on a shared religious heritage. A more multicultural approach—one that recognized and institutionalized the country’s pluralistic identity—could have laid the foundation for stronger Arabo-African relations, both for the country’s domestic politics and its international relation

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The Changing Perceptions of Afro-Arab Identity in Kenya

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Introduction

Identity is a complex term that is built upon a linguistic, cultural, and ethnic likeness and it often shares a common history and religion (Guse, 2009). Identity is a contested term which refers to features which individuals, groups and people claim, negotiate, and use to assert their differences within specific and general ethno-cultural and political contexts. The deliberate processes of promoting socio-cultural identities within a socio-political space triggers political exclusion, alienation, tension, and conflict (Schweitzer, Skold, Ulturgasheya, Fondahl, & Larsen, 2015). Afro-Arab identity is one of many contested identities in eastern Africa. Saleh (2010) examined Afro-Arab identities using the lens of Afro–Arab states, acculturation of African culture by Arab societies in the Middle East, and the acculturation of Arabic language and Islam by Africans. Saleh observed that misunderstanding and mistrust between Africans and Arabs can be eliminated with a realization of the commonalities that the two linguistic and cultural groups share.

The concept of Afrabia provides a framework for understanding Afro-Arab relations in Kenya, specifically the role of Arab minorities within Kenya. The concept of "Afrabia" refers to an interaction between Africanity and Arab identity, essentially an amalgamation of the two. There are four categories of Afrabia; cultural, ideological, demographic and genealogical (Mazrui, 2006). Kenyan Arabs predominantly live in the ten-mile coastal strip that includes Lamu, Malindi, and Mombasa. They have Kenyan citizenship and speak Kiswahili language more than they speak Arabic. The non-Kenyan Arabs who are traders in the coastal Kenyan towns speak Swahili rather than Arabic and are described as the Shihiri by Africans. Some descendants of the Shihiri have become Kenyan citizens. Swahili who trace distant ancestry to Yemen and or Oman prefer to describe themselves as both Africa

and Arab. The ethnonym Swahili brings out the complexity of Afro-Arab identity, since it was often a way for new migrants to mark their status as aspiring *waungwana*.

Pre-Colonial Period

Afro-Arab relations in East Africa and Arabian Peninsula date back to the pre-Islamic era. As early as the second century, Arab traders were sailing between the Arabian peninsula and the East African coast for commercial purposes, trading in ivory, fabrics, chewing gum, and animals. Arab traders were also coming with fabrics, food stuff, iron, weapons, and exchanged them for ivory, frankincense, Arabian gum, animals, and other goods (Alio, 2015).

As Arabs traded in East Africa, they intermarried with the coastal people. Arab traders introduced Islam to East African town dwellers and many urban dwellers converted to Islam. Afro-Arab identity sprouted as a result of intermarriage of Arabs with East African urbanites (Mwaliwa, 2018). Arab immigrants adopted the Kiswahili language as a result of the strong influence of the East African matrilineal system. Although acculturation of Arabs over time into Swahili culture and language reduced tensions in Afro-Arab relations, existing conflict is the result of the social marginalization of the laboring classes of whom the majority in the coastal towns were Africans; although Muslim, these laborers and other dependent social classes were often despised. (Lodhi, 1994).

Class hierarchy in Lamu dates much earlier than the entry of European imperialism. For instance, the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed was celebrated differently within different social classes. Originally, Mawlid Barzanji was celebrated by the aristocratic class - mainly those whose genealogy was traced to Arabs. The Mawlid Rama was celebrated by the elite Arab *waungwana*, while Mawlid ya Kiswahili was for the lowest class composed of descendants of the formerly enslaved or African inhabitants who had been employed in agriculture owned by the ruling class (Nkirote, 1987). Given the existence of slaves as a social class, different practices of Mawlid emerged - namely the al-Habshi and the conservative one. The al-Habshi's Mawlid was associated with Habib Swaleh who founded the Ribat al-Riyadha and incorporated drumming in the celebration of the birth of Prophet Muhammad. The other Mawlid was the conservative type which was patronized by the Salafi oriented ulema in the coastal region of Kenya. This conservative type of Mawlid celebrations did not allow the use of musical instruments or drums in the celebrations (Ndzovu, 2021).

The Afro-Arab identity in Lamu existed across the important social distinction between Wenyeji and Wageni. Wenyeji was used to refer to town dwellers who had already settled and established a privileged social class partially based on the prestige of Arab descent. The Wenyeji could be described as Afro-Arabs in the sense that they had adopted African/Swahili culture, language, and codes of conduct (Hillewaert, 2013). Wageni represented Arab immigrant traders who came to settle for short periods in Lamu. They were also accorded privileged status by virtue of their descent, Islamic knowledge, and control of maritime capital.

Social stratification in coastal Kenya was also described by the terms Uangwana and Uastarabu. These social ideals were adopted by immigrants to the coastal towns as markers of status. After manumission, descendants of former slaves strived to adopt the culture of the aristocratic social classes of the town, to which Islam, writing, and Arabic literacy were key. Ustarabu was the social ideal of urban refinement and Arab descent together representing someone with power, authority and resources (Ray, 2014).

Colonialism

As Afro-Arab relations emerged in the 18th to 19th century, it was British colonialism and the African independent leadership that would shape and institutionalize these identities and relations (Willis, Justin, & Mwakimako, 2021). The British contributed to the nature of Afro-Arab relations in Kenya. The British colonialists assumed that Arabs were the rulers of the coastal region. British colonialism enhanced the political and geographical separation of Arabs from Africans by giving them special rights such as voting, ownership of land, and serving in the colonial civil service. They used the Arab elites from the Mazrui, Nabahani and Busaidi clans in the colonial administration. In return for administering other coastal Muslims, namely the Mijikenda and the Swahili, Arabs enjoyed financial rewards and positions of power. The Liwali was the senior most Arab administrator of provincial and colonial administration that supervised collection of taxes from the Swahili and the Mijikenda (Ndzovu, 2010). The Arab administrators were thus used by the British colonial state to oppress the Swahili and the Mijikenda, and these groups gradually developed a hostile and negative attitude towards the Arabs who were the proxies of British colonialism (Schaffer

1979; Ndzovu, 2024). Colonial rule thus led to other coastal groups to challenge the presumed leadership by Arabs of coastal Muslims. The hostile and negative African perception against Arab administrators gradually initiated the growth of acrimonious Afro-Arab relations.

British racial policy affected Afro-Arab relations in Kenya. In1921, Arabs formed the Coast Arab Association to lobby for their economic, political, and social interests in colonial Kenya. As early as the 1920s, Arabs had successfully lobbied for direct representation in the legislative council, while Africans were represented by European missionaries. The concept of color bar was used to segregate, marginalize, and oppress darker-skinned Africans while giving preferential treatment to coastal Arabs. The Arabs of the coast clung to the small privileges they retained under colonial rule, protesting against being clustered with the “Swahili” as one homogenous group. As a result, non-Arab Muslims at the coast felt discriminated against.

In the colonial period, Arabs were able to own land and vote on a limited basis. Africans were denied the right to vote until the enactment of the Lyttleton constitution in 1954. In the colonial coastal ten-mile strip, Arabs owned and managed large plantations. Africans were inhabitants on these plantations during the colonial period. As a result, Africans developed a negative attitude against Arab plantation owners.

The Lancaster House Constitutional Conference brought these tensions to the fore. In the conference deliberations, the Arab community residing on the ten-mile coastal strip pushed for secession from Kenya, and to form their own autonomous state or be amalgamated with Zanzibar. This forced the British colonial government to organize a referendum in 1961 so that people of the coastal region and specifically the ten-mile coastal strip could vote to either remain in the Kenyan State or secede. The campaigns preceding the referendum divided the Mijikenda communities living in the towns of Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu. The Mijikenda claimed that the Arabs were foreigners and did not come to coastal region of Kenya with soil. This phrase - that Arabs did not come to Kenya with soil - was used to symbolize that Arabs came as traders into the Eastern African coast and did not come with land and thus remained foreigners and not indigenous to the coast. The Mijikenda maintained that they were the original inhabitants of the ten-mile strip and therefore would not allow Arabs to take over the territory. In the referendum, Arabs lost the vote and the ten-mile strip remained in Kenya.

African nationalists led by Ronald Ngala and Francis Khamisi mobilized Africans on the coastal strip to vote unanimously against secession.

Many coastal Arabs felt bitterness towards Africans who had betrayed their cause in the referendum. In the aftermath of the referendum there were many African and Arab oriented political parties formed in the coastal region of Kenya to champion either African or Arab interests. Arabs in Malindi formed the Kenya Protectorate Nationalist Party while their counterparts in Mombasa formed the Mombasa Political Union Party. Africans formed several political parties such as the Digo Mwambao Political Party, the Bajuni Federal Front, and the Shungwaya Freedom Party among others (Ndzovu, 2010).The Coastal Peoples Party (CPP) based in Mombasa was the most articulate in championing self-determination for the Arabs and Swahili in Mombasa. The CPP can be described as an Afro-Arab party for its agenda and manifesto was based on the understanding that the Swahili and Arabs are one community with common interests that have to be protected from upcountry Africans who were presumed to be the "other" (Brennan 2008, 845-846). These parties aggravated Afro-Arab relations in the ten-mile coastal region.

Arabs from Yemen retained their unique social-cultural organization throughout the British colonial administration. They had their own traditional religious leaders and took advantage of the multi-racial administrative structure in the 1950s to have their own civic and legislative representatives in organs of power. In the coastal secessionist movement, the majority of Yemeni Arabs remained aloof because their identity remained more orientated to Yemen than Kenya. After independence, Yemeni Arabs who remained were absorbed into the larger Swahili identity (Salim, 1983).

Afro-Arab Relations in Post-Colonial Kenya

The 1964 revolution in Zanzibar exacerbated already strained Afro-Arab relations in eastern Africa. The Omani monarchy in Zanzibar was seen as a proxy for an alleged Arab colonialism. The revolution stirred violent currents of Arabophobia in eastern Africa that had long lasting effects on Afro-Arab relations. The revolution rekindled African memories of Arab involvement in slave trade and the extreme violation of the rights of Africans who were forced into slavery particularly in the clove and coconut plantations in the coastal region of eastern Africa.

This Arabophobia gradually became institutionalized in post-colonial Kenyan state. In the post-colonial period, Africans were in charge of the state and thus controlled and monopolized power. They took advantage of the appeal of ethnic politics to emphasize that coastal peoples' racial identity was tied to Arabism and thus exclude them from access to state apparatus. Kenyan leadership used the label "Arab" to justify exclusion of coastal Arabs from owning critical means of productions, such as land om the coast (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012).

Arabophobia has continued to characterize politics in post-colonial Kenya. Politicians who are identified as Arabs do not succeed in marshalling support from Swahili and Mijikenda communities who consider themselves the indigenous inhabitants of the coast. At the turn of the 21st century, politicians such as Sharif Nassir and Najib Balala were associated with the Omani and Yemeni Arabs and, as a result, could not secure support from the Mijikenda in particular and members of other African communities living at the coast. In order to penetrate the African electoral block in 2013, Hassan Joho had to nominate a Mijikenda as his running mate in his contest for the gubernatorial seat of Mombasa County. He won the elections and became not only popular on the coast but nationally. In the 1990s, Sharif Nassir had to use Karisa Maitha as a point man in his pursuit to control the politics of Mombasa and the entire coast. Sharif Nassir was both a member of parliament and a cabinet minister in the government of Daniel Arap Moi (Willis and Mwakimako, 2021).

The political mobilizing around Mwambao and a distinct separatist "Pwani" identity has emerged among the Swahili, Mijikenda, and Arab communities on the coast as an overarching category for one people who share a maritime and African culture, a people whose identity is basically Afro-Arab. The many centuries of acculturation of Arabs to Swahili language and Africans to Islam has produced a distinct group which cannot fit in the ethnonym of either Swahili or Arab or African, hence the emergence of this new category or identity of Afro-Arab. The marginalization of the majority of the people in Kenya's coast region from mainstream governance and ownership of key economic sectors has continued to concretize the Afro-Arab identity in Kenya (Willis and Gona, 2012).

Conclusion

Afro-Arab identity is closely associated with controversies over the limits of inclusion and hierarchy within Swahili urban culture. Afro-Arab identity has been portrayed as synonymous with the struggle for the autonomy of the coastal region of Kenya. Afro-Arab identity has also been discussed in relation to racist British ideology that facilitated a divide-and-rule strategy to enable British domination and control of the Kenyan people. The British colonialists succeeded in dividing Arabs and Africans in Kenya despite the fact that these two communities had a long shared history. Since gaining independence, successive governments of independent Kenya have continued to politically and economically marginalize the people of the coastal region.

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Afro-Arab Marxism and the Zanzibar Revolution

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In the wake of the sixty-year anniversary of the revolution (2024), it is an opportune time to reassess the political significance of members of the Umma Party, a Marxist political party in Zanzibar, to the 1964 Revolution. In this article, I explore new biographies from former Umma Party members to shed light on their development of an African Marxism and analyze how this commitment to Marxism influenced their participation in the revolution (Shivji, 2003). Umma Party experiences show there was a radical non-chauvinist Marxist element within the generally ethno-nationalist thrust of the Zanzibar Revolution. But Umma's member's participation is also a cautionary tale of the dangers of believing one is a vanguard when in fact one is simply 'tailing'—following a dominant reactionary tendency.

Afro-Arab defined

The term Afro-Arab has been used in the historiography to describe a variety of encounters and relations between Arabs and peoples of Africa, and it predates though is closely related to Mazrui's coining of "Afrabia." The term is awkward, since by counterposing the term Arab to the term African, one perhaps contributes to the very issue one wants to undermine - thinking of Arabs as necessarily non-African or overdrawing the distinction between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

The term has a powerful connotation in decolonization-era debates over identity, belonging, and power and their engagement with the previous century's contentious history of boundary drawing and state-building. Afro-Arab rapprochement indicated something broader than narrow nationalism: the possibilities of transcontinental solidarity in which African and Middle Eastern nations together threw off the yoke of economic and political dependency on the metropole,

created a new 'world' trading and relating primarily to each other rather than the west (Lee, 2010; Getachew, 2019). Transregional cultural connections were reframed as the basis for political and economic solidarity; this cosmopolitan dimension of anticolonial nationalism was an experimental way for diaspora groups in Africa and Asia to assert their belonging in-and-through the nation.[1]

In the 1970s and 1980s, Afro-Arab was used to name the "Terramedia," a region midway between Europe and Asia, and was used to discuss OAU cooperation and the issue of Israeli-African relations (Beshir, 1976; Azevedo, 1988). In the 2000s, Afro-Arab was used to discuss conflict in Sudan in borderland regions of encounters between Arabs and other Africans (such as in Nuba Mountains, Abyei, and the Southern Blue Nile; Deng, 2009). In literature studies, Afro-Arab describes a space of uneven cultural and familial encounter, often characterized by silencing and violent erasure (Mayyas, 2023).

There is, additionally, a growing historiography on the pre-nineteenth century aspects of the Arab encounters with Africa and Africans (Schine, 2023; Kadhem, 2023). In the Indian Ocean world, the Swahili Coast has long been a borderland of sometimes contentious Afro-Arab encounter, particularly in Zanzibar, the center of a nineteenth century Islamic emirate ruled by an Afro-Arab dynasty. Scholarly approaches which keep Africanity open, while at the same time not shying away from nor apologizing for issues related to an enduring sense of 'otherness' and marginalization of Black North Africans or Black Yemenis, are able to address the complexities of the Afro-Arab relationship in Zanzibar without recourse to collective ressentiment and recrimination (Young & Weitzbreg, 2022).

A common dynamic during decolonization was looking to the past a source for cultural decolonization that should and would accompany decolonization of the political community. As a result of the promise of independent statehood, those sharing an anticolonial orientation were often divided by "competing national horizons," rival orientations to a contentious history of

[1] See for instance Khamis Abdallah Ameir's description of learning Latin American dances from a Nigerian in London, attended predominantly by Ethiopian students (Khamis Abdallah Ameir, *Maisha Yangu: Miaka minane ndani ya Baraza la Mapinduzi: Khaini au mhanga wa mapinduzi?*, DL_2A – Buluu Publishing, 2022, p. 27).

nineteenth century state-building.[2] In African borderlands, from the Sahel to the Swahili Coast, tensions developed across this divide. These tensions were particularly acute in areas where, during the nineteenth century, groups of Arabs had preyed upon, warred with or dominated other African groups. In essence the tension was about the legacy of these older relations of dominance and subordination for the cultural direction of the state after independence. In Sudan, it led to a multi-decade civil war; in Zanzibar, it resulted in a revolution.

The Afro-Arab phenomenon in Zanzibar

I use the term Afro-Arab to describe a political orientation among Zanzibar's locally born Arab community. What makes the individuals discussed below "Afro-Arab," when they themselves did not always use such a term? At one level, they are Afro-Arab because of partially African ancestry. The Zanzibaris whose biographies I present below are part of a larger cultural phenomenon of maritime Arab intermarriage with other Muslims in the Swahili towns dotting the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa.[3] Enseng Ho refers to the offspring of Hadrami migrants with local spouses in Indonesia and East Africa as *muwalladūn*. The phenomenon extends beyond Hadramis to Omanis as well and is an apt term for their social identity in Zanzibar. In Ali Mazrui's thought, he distinguished these as generational Afrabians, formed by one or more generations of mixed marriage practices. Similar to the prazeros phenomenon among Portuguese settlers further to the south in Mozambique, Omani and Yemeni intermarriage with the Swahili has been a major factor in East African history.

But, Afro-Arab as I use it here connotes something more specifically political than the marriage practices of Indian Ocean Arab lineages. Even if they spoke Swahili fluently and had African mothers of grandmothers, muwalladūn of Zanzibar would not necessarily have sympathized with anticolonial nationalism nor with the specific embrace of Pan-Africanism. But, a younger politicized generation of muwalladūn in Zanzibar identified explicitly with forms of Pan-African

[2] See discussion of Francis Deng's *War of Visions* in Zachary Mondesire, "The Art of Revolution: Race, Geopolitics, and Productive Nostalgia between Two Sudans" in Hisham Aidi and Marc Lynch (eds.) *Race-Making in Africa and the Middle East* (Cornell University Pres, 2026).
[3] See for instance the incisive comments of Ibrahim Sundiata on the comparison of the Omani presence in Zanzibar with the Portuguese in East Africa and in Brazil, "Twentieth Century Reflections on Death in Zanzibar" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20.1 (1987), 45-60.

nationalism in the broader region and tried to apply and integrate this discourse into their anticolonial stance; it is this attitude that specifically defines an ‘Afro-Arab’ attitude there. In short, while muwalladūn is a generational identity related to intermarriage with East Africans and sociocultural processes of localization, I use Afro-Arab to describe a new and experimental ideological stance, the product of practical attempts to integrate two contentious and vaguely defined supra-nationalist ethnic ideologies – pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism - with nationalism, often drawing heavily on Marxism. The latter identity is drawn from experiences of the former; the Afro-Arab radicals grew up with family and personal experience of a community of urban Muslims of Arab, Comorian, Shirazi, and other East African backgrounds (Loiemeier, 2009).

Secondary empire and colonial rule in Zanzibar: the Afro-Arabs as colonizer/colonized

It is important to note that some groups that eventually fell under British protection had actively pursued relationships to British imperial power in the nineteenth century and were conceived (at least officially) in terms of co-equals before the protection relationship was established. Such was the case for the Omani emirate in Zanzibar. The Omani ruler Seyyid Said had consciously cultivated a relationship with British power even before he moved his capital to Zanzibar, and scholars have seen Zanzibar as a form of ‘secondary empire,’ where reliance on imported European military and political technology enabled the political success of non-European states. One might say that, as a result of the localization of their lineages through the matriline, the Omani clans in East Africa became “colonizers with a difference.” After Seyyid Said’s death, the ruling dynasty in Zanzibar had been formally separated from the dynasty in Oman by the British, though ties of kinship and family continued to deeply link the two ‘houses’ (Zbik, 2024). The monarchy in Zanzibar accommodated itself to British order through a legal arrangement meant to preserve a fiction of sovereignty for the monarchy while granting the British control over external defense and the state purse.

Under British protection, the islands’ economies from 1890-1950 were partially transformed. The clove plantation sector, originally reliant on now-prohibited enslaved labor, had to synthesize new labor arrangements to guarantee the planting and picking of cloves in the wake of aboliti

Some former slaveowners gave stakes in land to their former slaves to continue to ensure the necessary labor. The sector was also propped up by migrant labor from the mainland, with some migrants also given a stake in the land by owners in order to remain in Zanzibar after the harvest. However, other plantations became heavily mortgaged and some landowners lost their lands to creditors. The contradictory position of the Arabs in the early twentieth century is revealed in Jacques Depelchin’s statement: “among the Arab planters quite a good number were pauperized by the prohibition of the slave trade and, later, the abolition of the legal status of slavery. Their former status must have influenced their arrogant attitude toward the ex-slaves and local Hadimu [a Shirazi group], but in terms of relations of production they were closer to the latter than to the richer Arab landlords” (Depelchin, 1991). This contradictory class position led many of the offspring of this group to pursue higher education abroad on scholarships provided by the colonial state.

Anticolonial nationalism and Marxism in Zanzibar

Anticolonial nationalism was a strategic adaptation largely initiated from among groups in their colonies that British officials hoped to train as an aspirant bourgeoise. The possibilities of an oppositional anticolonial politics among this group were enhanced by developments in the wake of World War II. The postwar weakening of British and French empires led colonial officials to introduce a “rationalized” approach to development in the colonies meant to ideologically justify colonial rule. Extending the logics of development and progress to mass politics, a cadre of politically aware elites in African countries, many of them educated in colonial metropoles, began to develop a local base among the masses.

This was a time of possibility and tumult among a generation of colonized peoples about world politics. Possibility because it seemed possible to use politics to shift underlying relations of economic inequality and dependency between world regions in a short amount of time. Tumult because it was also a time of debate over the boundaries of the imagined community forming the new nations and of the class and ethnic tensions of the nationalist coalition. Both of these dynamics began to be strongly felt in Zanzibar from the late 1940s. New ideas of national independence acquired from both travel and colonial education, informed a new interest by

Zanzibaris interest in Marxism as well as pan-Arabism, and pan-Africanism. Both the Soviet Union and China gave material support to radical thinkers in Zanzibar, both to study abroad and to train cadres locally. In fact, for a time, the two countries were supporting rival political parties —the Soviets the ASP and the Chinese the ZNP, as well as their respective trade union organizations, the Zanzibar and Pemba Federation of Labor (ZPFL) and the Federation of Progressive Trade Unions (FTPU; Hunter, 1966, p. iii-v).

Nationalist intellectuals in Zanzibar responded in different ways to other projects of anti-imperialism in Africa and Asia. Ali Muhsin al-Barwani saw Zanzibar as well positioned to respond to Egypt's positioning as Pan-African and Pan-Arab leader and sought closer ties with the country (Lofchie, 1965, p. 258). Young African intelligentsia like Abdullah Kassim Hanga had an opportunity to study in eastern bloc countries. Others studied in Cairo, London, China, the USSR, and Cuba. Hashil S. Hashil related that he and his fellow Zanzibari youth of the 1950s closely followed Radio Cairo broadcasts and newspapers, admiring Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah, Ho Chi Minh, and Gamel Abdel Nasser, at one point forming a group called the Moscow Boys (Hashil, 2018, p. 10). In Zanzibar, groups like the Young Muslim League, the Zanzibar Action Group, and the Youths Own Union, attempted to channel the desires of a new generation into an anticolonial nationalist direction.

Why did Marxism seem to appeal to some Zanzibari youth in this period more fundamentally than Islamic nationalism? After all, Zanzibar was among a handful of majority Muslim states in the broader region, with a ready-made literate tradition that was homegrown. Ali Sultan Issa provides one clue in his description of what he knew about Islam growing up in Zanzibar, "I was ignorant of Muslim belief because in school, we were never taught the meaning of Islam. Since Arabic was not our mother tongue, we never knew the meaning of the words we learned; we recited the Quran like parrots…when a person is exposed to a new philosophy without a solid basis in Islam, it is easy to doubt" (Burgess, 2009). Ali Sultan, in this interview with Gary Burgess, is speaking as a former Marxist who became a devout Muslim much later in life, essentially chalking up his embrace of Marxism to ignorant naivete. Islam seemed to Ali Sultan's generation as a bit of local custom, rather than the blueprint for a robust political program.

But, beyond the sense of alienation from the philosophical bases of justification for Islamic belief, there were more explicitly political reasons for Marxism’s popularity on the islands. Marxism seemed to promise a more robust level of social equality than traditional Islamic practices, which were steeped in local forms of hierarchy and deference and hived off according to sect and ethnicity. Marxism was future oriented, containing an explicitly teleological view of politics that dovetailed with the political idealism of anticolonial nationalism. It was also more experimental than the Islam of Zanzibari elders; less concerned about the themes of public morality (especially of women) that had characterized the discourse of Islamic reformers on the coast over the first half of the twentieth century. As such, Marxism was invested in ideologically by the younger generation with the conviction that it could more effectively overcome national chauvinism (narrow nationalism) and aid development. To Marxist leaning Afro-Arabs, the ideology had already demonstrated its transformative power to develop the energies of the nation; they thought they had seen as much during their study in eastern bloc countries. Marxism provided a progressive vision of national socioeconomic transformation that could submerge the war of nationalisms in Zanzibar into an anticolonial class struggle (Sheriff, 2001).

Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu was the most influential Marxist intellectual on the islands during the Time of Politics. He was born 22 September, 1924 on the island of Pemba. He attended through Standard 13 at the Government Central School, then clerked at the Clove Growers Association from 1944-1951, and briefly spent time at Makerere before going to London in 1951 to study. Babu’s six years in London were extremely influential on hiss political commitments, as he encountered different strains of left thought from socialism to anarchism (Markle, 2017, p. 21).

Ali Sultan Issa remarked, “my friendship with Babu began at a very early age. Babu…was several years older than I and lived just across the alley from our house in Malindi” (Burgess, 2009, p. 36). Ali Sultan came from a more affluent section of the island’s Arab community but rebelled against the strictures of conservative Zanzibari society: “I did not belong to the school of thought that Arabs had achieved great things in Africa. What had they achieved? Nothing, except the accumulation of wealth for some and poverty for others” (Burgess, 2009, p. 36). Ali Sultan studied in the UK and traveled in India, Japan, South Africa, and Canada. He also

attended trade union conferences in China and joined his uncle Ahmed Rashad in Cairo where he became a ZNP representative (Brennan, 2010). As Ali Sultan notes, his uncle was "a radical in those days, wanting to get rid of the sultan" (Burgess, 2009, p. 63).

A contemporary of Babu, who was also with him in London, was Khamis Ameir, born May 1,1930 in Pemba to an Omani father with a Nyasa grandmother, and an Omani mother from the Mazrui tribe. Khamis's father took care of families in both Oman and Zanzibar. The family in Zanzibar was not wealthy, and this perspective seems to have influenced Khamis Ameir's concern for working people throughout his life. He also traveled widely as a seaman before returning to Zanzibar. In 1952 in London, Khamis met a young man from Unguja who introduced him to East Africa House, where other Zanzibari students were staying. He eventually came to room at "Swiss Cottage" with three other Zanzibari students, including Ali Sultan Issa. Back home in Zanzibar after 1960, Khamis Ameir became active in the trade union movement (Loiemeier, 2009, p. 563). Notably, he never became a member of Zanzibar's two dominant political parties of the late 1950s/early 1960s: neither ZNP nor the ASP, before joining Umma Party in 1963.

Ahmed Badawi Qullatein was another prominent member of this cohort. He was also born in 1930 and was already active in the trade union movement when Khamis Ameir joined. Badawi left the ZPFL in 1960, as a result of its support for the ASP (which at the time was still opposing immediate independence for Zanzibar) and formed the FPTU, an explicitly Marxist trade union. It has been alleged that Badawi was informed of the possibility of the Revolution by a Committee of 14 who organized the revolution, and that Badawi informed Babu (Haider, 2011).

Hashil S. Hashil was born at sea, in a car on a barge going to Mtambwe Pemba, on January 12, 1938. He grew up in a village in North Unguja, child of Seif bin Hashil al-Busaidi, an Omani-born migrant from Ibra, and a Pemban born woman of Zarai ethnicity named Mwanadawa binti Jadi Khamis. Hashil was the last born of twenty-four children. According to his memoir, his political consciousness developed in childhood, when he would defend others in the neighborhood from being bullied (Hashil, 2018, p. 9). After graduating from secondary school at Beit el-Ras, he went to India in order to get employment on a ship, but couldn't find one and

returned to Zanzibar, before being sent to Cuba for military training by arrangement of Ali Sultan Issa.

The Umma Party as an Afro-Arab phenomenon

The formation of the ideological core of the Umma Party can be said to have originally come from London, where Abdulrahman Babu, Ali Sultan Issa, and Khamis Ameir first lived and organized together. Ali Sultan Issa encountered Marxism, and according to Ahmed Rajab, helped move Babu’s view from anarchism to Marxism. A fourth, Badawi Qullatein, was also a mainstay among Zanzibari students in London. According to Issa, “Only Badawi [Qullatein], Khamis, and I were able to debate with Babu ideologically because we had been more exposed than had the others…we were the four leaders of the Umma movement, a quartet, and Babu never did anything without our support” (Burgess, 2009, p. 81).

Many of the members of the Umma Party began as members of a much larger party called the Zanzibar Nationalist Party. In essence, this latter party was an alliance between the muwalladun-led Zanzibar National Union (ZNU), and a Shirazi protest group called the National Party for the Subjects of the Sultan. The latter protest group had their issue made (post hoc) into an explicitly nationalist one, in which the muwalladun elite of the ZNU forged an alliance with the local farmer members of the NPSS that allowed them to claim they represented the masses of ordinary islanders (Glassman, 2014). Politically, the new party, called “Hizb al-Watan al-Raia” or Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP), was dominated by an alliance of Arab and Shirazi constitutional monarchists, who envisioned a transition to parliamentary democracy in Zanzibar, with a role for the monarchy like that of the United Kingdom. However, the party was thrown into disarray by its overwhelming loss in Zanzibar’s first elections of July 1957. While the elections did not determine the transfer power to a new government, they heralded a shift in the locus of popular sovereignty towards the island’s African majority.

After his return to the islands from London, Abdulrahman Babu became Secretary General of the ZNP, leading it through a period of its most notable electoral success in a series of hotly contested elections in 1960 and 1961. Lofchie observed, “Babu…enjoyed considerable

popularity in the African community…His personal opposition to Muhsin and to the influence of the Arab oligarchy within the ZNP were widely known to Africans, as was his deep commitment to revolutionary social change" (Lofchie, 1965, p. 278). He helped form the progressive youth wing of the ZNP which sought outreach to African youth around the idea of anticolonial nationalism (Wilson, 2013, p. 22). Babu and his cadres aided similar efforts through the trade unions, attempting to build a class unity that could counter the racialized political deadlock.

The ZNP revamped its strategy to make inroads among the islands' African voters. The initiative for their electoral success in 1960 and 1961, compared to 1957, came from the organizing efforts among the African community. In close elections, the ZNP demonstrated its ability to consolidate a popular base among the African masses. Appeals to Pan-Africanism increasingly became part of the party's outreach. In 1958, Babu participated in the founding of PAFMECA, the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa, an umbrella organization that sought to unify the anti-colonial nationalists of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Nyasaland. Babu saw Pan-African unity as the instrument for bringing consort and unity between Zanzibar's conflicting nationalist visions.

In 1962, Babu was arrested twice by the colonial government and charged with sedition, and some of his associates were charged with 'bringing in seditious materials.' The materials in question were an edition of Babu's newspaper, ZANEWS (founded 1960). Babu was not protected from the colonial government by ZNP leadership; Hashil S. Hashil claims that the party was threatened that the independence handover would not happen unless Babu's influence was curtailed; he claims the British played on Ali Muhsin's already existing fears about the influence of Babu's Marxist ideas (Hashil, 2018, p. 29-30). When Ali Sultan Issa protested to Shamte and other ZNP leaders, they suspended Ali Sultan from the Executive Committee of the ZNP (Hashil, 2018, p. 32). The Marxist- wing of the ZNP was becoming alienated from the more conservative Islamic nationalists of the party.

In April 1963, Babu was released from prison, a few months before the July 1963 election that would grant a government sovereign power in Zanzibar. Babu's final break with the ZNP came over a practical expression of ZNP strategy in the July election; he argued the party should ru

candidates of different ethnicities in different constituencies than their traditional ones, in order to show the ZNP was truly a post-communal nationalist party (Burgess, 2010). After ignoring his advice and winning the July 1963 election, ZNP leadership felt sure they could govern Zanzibar without the party's left wing. On December 10, 1963, this fragile and isolated government celebrated Zanzibar's independence from colonial rule.

In the new political formation he formed after leaving the ZNP, Babu and his comrades gathered around themselves a cohort of Afro-Arab youth with socialist convictions. Many of these new recruits were the offspring of the landowning families who were descendants of the nineteenth century Omani ruling class. In the words of Ahmed Rajab, they "committed class suicide, actually, by siding with the masses from a very early stage of [their] lives. This came as a result of their attempting to get in touch with the political desires and sentiments of the working classes, including through active participation in the labor movement (Rajab, 2022). Umma should be understood, thus, as an experimental Marxist party formed to ally with and guide the working classes of Zanzibar in progressive socialist development of Zanzibar (Markle, 2013).

Born nearly a decade or two after him, Babu provided guidance and grounding for the youth of Umma, as a "local cosmopolitan," someone who had traveled internationally, was patriotically devoted to Zanzibar, and had the courage of his anticolonial convictions. He was also a married man with children. According to Seth Markle, "He became known for living a modest lifestyle free of…corruption and class elitism" (Markle, 2017, p. 59). To Hashil S. Hashil, of all Zanzibari political figures, Babu was the teacher who "influenced me the most" (Hashil, 2018, p. 11).

The Afro-Arabs of Umma Party in the Zanzibar Revolution

The history of the Zanzibar Revolution is replete with controversies, at which Umma cadres were often at the center. Though Babu himself was on the mainland at the time of the Revolution, other Umma Party members participated directly. Opinions about Umma's role in the revolution diverge widely, not only among commentators of among those who lived through the events. Umma presence in the streets chanting "Venceremos!" led to western paranoia of a Communist takeover of the island (Hunter, 2013, p. 100-101). While several of my Zanzibari interviewee

Oman called Umma the “brainbox” of the revolution, others understood them as having “betrayed” the Arabs in Zanzibar, leading to the massacres of 1964. Other interviewees scoffed at Umma Party claims to have made the revolution socialist and denied that Umma members had taken a meaningful part in the revolution. A few even claimed that Umma members only participated in the revolution to “save their own skin,” meaning to avoid falling victim to an anti-Arab pogrom.

A theme many interviewees as well as scholars have emphasized is that Umma Party members helped curtail the criminal aspects that came with the breakdown of order caused by the overthrow of the government. Benn Haider notes that, Badawi Qullatein “instructed Umma militants to guard their neighbourhoods and families from roaming criminal bands of lumpens who saw the revolution as a racial anti-Arab orgy” (Haider, 2011). Khamis Ameir noted that the role of Umma Party was to prevent “mambo machafu” (dirty things: stealing, raping, or killing innocent people) being done by some revolutionaries (Ameir, 2022, p. 73).

Amrit Wilson claimed that Umma helped secure the revolution, and agrees with Mahmood Mamdani’s argument that Umma prevented a situation like post-1959 Rwanda from developing, crystallizing revolutionaries and anti-revolutionaries on ethnic lines (qtd. in Wilson, 2013, p. 48). Though many actual participants in the paramilitary action that unseated the government denied that Umma Party members had any foreknowledge of their plans, this was not completely true, according to Khamis Ameir, who said that Badawi Qullatein knew more than other Umma members as a result of his trade union ties. Umma cadres also organized military groups to take over the Cable and Wireless station, the prison at Kiinua Miguu, and the Malindi police station; Hashil Seif Hashil led a group of Cuba-trained Umma paramilitaries in taking over the former, and also assisted in the storming of the Malindi police station and the prison (Wilson, 2013, p. 48; Ameir, 2022, p. 95-6).

Regrettably, Babu never divulged fully what had happened during the revolution. According to Horace Campbell, “In fact, Babu had developed a draft outline of his memoirs and these were to have been published as part of a project on the Biography of African Leaders” (Campbell, 1996, p. 240-246). Though these memoirs are yet to see the light of day, Babu presented his theory

the revolution in an important essay to an important edited volume on Zanzibar's colonial history with an explicitly Marxist, materialist focus. In Babu's view, the revolution started as a unified "peoples uprising," was guided into a revolution by Umma comrades, and was subverted by the Union and Karume's dictatorship. In his essay, "The 1964 Revolution: Lumpen or Vanguard," Babu presented the revolution as "the culmination of a people's struggle against more than two centuries of aggression and oppression by foreigners, by slave traders, by Omani colonialism, and by seventy years of British colonialism." Relevant to how he perceived the Afro-Arab phenomenon, he notes that most of the rank-and-file members of the Arab Association "had long ago ceased to be Arabs," referring to the practice of local marriage of Arabs to ex-slaves (Babu, 1991). Babu viewed the ethnically motivated killings during revolution as minor and inconsequential for its legacy.

There is a tendency in Wilson and some of the other literature on Zanzibar to take western paranoia of Communism as a sign that powerful and influential Umma cadres were in control of the revolution, before interference by Karume, Nyerere, and western powers. For instance, Markle writes, "The prominence and activity of Umma youth during the '100 days' of the People's Republic of Zanzibar represented the temporary realization of Babu's theories of a vanguard generation bringing about socialist development" (Burgess qtd. in Markle, 2017). From this perspective, only US and British pressure on Nyerere contained the power of Babu and propped up Karume against the younger left-leaning members of his government. An article from *Pambazuka* recycles most of these tropes into a teleological narrative of Marxist struggle:

> The party's creation was a correct analysis of the potentially revolutionary conditions. On January 12, 1964, the unemployed and oppressed youth of Zanzibar rose up in spontaneous rebellion. The Ummah Party leadership used its organizing experience and training in Cuba to teach the youth revolutionary tactics and gain leadership of the insurrection. The Ummah party and disaffected youth removed the Sultan from power. This was Africa's first successful revolution to overthrow neocolonialism (Woods, 2014).

This conclusion is mistaken for *four* reasons. First, that western powers expressed concern out of a basic ideological outlook of anti-Communism is not in doubt. But the above views by scholars take western fears at face value, as expressive of a real plot to undo the Revolution. US anxiety over Communism in Zanzibar does not amount to a plot, whatever Umma's intentions may have

been. The agency of Karume and Nyerere, not international pressure, was paramount to the Union formed in April 1964 between Zanzibar and Tanganyika.

Second, Umma was a coalitional partner in the revolution, and not the dominant one. The revolution was not a spontaneous uprising by the masses, but a covert paramilitary action planned for months in secret by Okello and associates. Umma comrades went into the streets after the storming of the police station and army barracks by Okello's forces but were never in meaningful control of the direction off the revolution, though they did succeed partially in tamping down on the criminal violence that occurred during the pogrom accompanying it. An interview with Okello, Babu, and Karume together held soon after January 12, 1964, reflects the uneasy and distrustful dynamic of their alliance; Babu's fluency in English may give the mistaken impression he is in control of the situation, when in reality he was the least powerful member of the coalition.

These views condescend to Karume in that they tend to assume that, had western powers not gotten involved, the Umma Party members would have politically outmaneuvered their partners in the revolution. Karume was a savvy political operator with a popular base among the Zanzibar masses much larger than Babu or any other Zanzibar politician. Wilson presents the Union as giving Karume free reign over "the discipline imposed by the revolution" (Wilson, 2007, p.12). It is true that the Union strengthened the hand of Karume, but although Babu and other muwalladun politicos thought Karume was a naïve and weakened force who needed guidance from the left, the discipline imposed by the revolution was as much Karume's contribution as it was Babu's.

Third, the perspectives of Babu and those writers most influenced by his perspective do not deal forthrightly with the racial nationalist motivations of a number of revolutionaries, though Hashil and Ameir's memoirs do address it.[4] Few take seriously that it was directly connected to the racialist ideology of its initiator, John Okello. In actuality, the revolution has as much claim to being a racial-nationalist event as it does a socialist uprising (Ibrahim, n.d.). Elements who made

[4] Ameir (*Maisha Yangu*, p. 77 & 100) criticizes the lack of planning by the Revolutionary Council and Umma's overreliance on the ASP.

the revolution acted out of grievances against the ZNP and ZPPP, which they saw as symbolic of illegitimate Arab dynastic rule over an African majority. The racial and criminal aspects of the violence demonstrate just this. Most of the violence was conducted not against Arab landlords, but against Arab immigrants, mostly small landowners and petty traders who the attackers did not know personally.

Finally, although the Afro-Arab Umma members understood well and criticized that the revolution was “eating its own,” there is little evidence that Babu, for instance, ever connected that tendency to the basically extra-legal way in which the revolutionaries had gained power (Burgess, 2009, p. 129). Though his essay in *African Socialism or a Socialist Africa?* entitled, “Fighting Internal Oppression,” Babu launched a trenchant criticism of the “long, sad spectacle of the naked misuse of power by people in authority,” he never renounced the takeover of power through extralegal means in the revolution, nor seemed to recognize that it was this act itself which opened the door for the authoritarian turn of Zanzibar under the dictatorship of Karume(Babu, 1981, p. 165). This nuanced critique of Umma in the revolution came from the late Seif Sharif Hamad (1943-2021), a longtime Zanzibar government minister and member of parliament. Hamad dismissed claims that the revolutionaries, “liberated us from the sultan’s rule,” for “the sultan was just a symbol without any power at all. And even if there was widespread feeling among the ASP mainstream that the sultan was an Arab, an alien to the country, with no right to rule or serve as head of state in Zanzibar, the question could have been resolved peacefully through a national referendum...” (Burgess, 2009, p.190).

Regardless of the truth of this counterfactual, it points to a contrast between the experimental and often utopian expressions of Afro-Arab and Afro-Asian interstate fraternity justifying the revolution, and the racialized violence that killed several thousand innocents, many of them immigrants, and made thousands more into refugees, while destroying a unique culture and way of life on the islands. The realization that the dark side of the Revolution had in the long run overpowered its idealism, drove considerable anguish among a number of former Comrades and some eventually rejected Marxism as a result.

The Umma Party: lessons for Afro-Arab solidarity

What can the Afro-Arabs of Umma teach us in the present day? Umma Party members were products of their time, a heady period of global experimentation with new ideological forms by politically conscious youth in Africa and Asia. The excesses of revolutionary rhetoric were also characteristic of the period in which they lived, when revolution seemed no longer utopian but inevitable. In many ways, the Afro-Arab Marxists of Umma are a cautionary tale: confusing a genuine vanguard movement with one that is tailing off the initiative of others, they were swept into a governing coalition they did not control, banned as a party, and eventually purged from the Revolutionary Council and the Zanzibar government.

However, there is a distinct and valuable ethos salvageable from the ruins of Marxist experimentation on the islands. While the Afro-Arabs are a product of mobility and travel, they in fact represent a path of de-diasporization, representing an alternative to the postmodern embrace of mobility as ethos, as found in discourses of hybridity and creolization, as well as to the alternative universalism of Islamic purism that has recently gained ground in Zanzibar. The paths pursued by the Afro-Arab cadres of Umma symbolize a recoverable ethos enduring in the ruins of the experimental synthesis of anticolonial nationalism and Marxism: a cosmopolitan refusal of national chauvinism alongside a patriotic commitment to helping local people and solving local problems.

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Senghor, Fanon, and "Afro-Arab Civilization"

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The Senegalese poet-president Léopold Senghor and the Martinican psychiatrist-philosopher Frantz Fanon both had a keen interest in North Africa and competing visions of the relationship between "Arab and Negro." Morocco would play a significant role in their intellectual formation and political trajectories. Fanon's experience in the Free French Army, stationed in Casablanca during World War II, would leave a mark on his political thought. In 1953, after completing his military service and studies the Martinican doctor had written to Senghor hoping to find employment in Senegal, but Fanon never received a response from the Senegalese poet and so headed to Blida, Algeria. As the Algerian struggle developed into a war, Fanon would return repeatedly to Morocco for meetings and training. It was in Oujda, in June 1959, that the Martinican, following a suspicious car accident, suffered serious wounds that would leave him temporarily paralyzed and severely affect his health.

Senghor, a close friend of King Hassan II, was a regular presence in Morocco from the 1970s to the late 1990s, appearing at conferences and media events, commenting on the continuities and similarities between Senegal and the North African kingdom, extolling both countries as models of civilizational métissage. Historians have highlighted the parallels between Morocco and Senegal, noting the persistence of French colonial legacies (how colonial policies implemented in Morocco, were often first tried in Senegal,) the centrality of Sufism, the emphasis on religious diplomacy, and the institutional capacity of Sufi tariqas, which, in both countries, play a role akin to political parties (Segalla, 2009). Scholars have long noted how Morocco's self-image is shaped by its relationship to Spain and al-Andalus, and the circulation of religious discourse and symbolism between Morocco and Senegal, with Senegalese political discourse depicting Morocco as a mirror or wellspring (Aidi, 2006; Benaboud, 2015; Seck, 2015). But Moroccan political discourse also tends to speak of Senegal as a political mirror and source. The credo

Morocco as a tree rooted in Africa but open to Europe, recalling Senghor's calls for "enracinement et ouverture" was born at the annual Afro-Arab Forum (*al-muntada al-arabi al-ifriki*) launched in 1980 in Asilah by the Moroccan diplomat Mohammed Benaissa. The prevailing discourse of Afro-convivencia, as I call it, which locates Morocco as rooted in the Sahel, but extending to Iberia, portraying the kingdom as a mirror and extension of both Spain and Senegal, found its modern expression in Asilah as a result of dialogue between Arabophone, Hispanophone, and African intellectuals.

Black Maghrib:

Since the post-war years, North African Pan-Africanism has, reflecting political circumstances, tended to vacillate between Fanon and Senghor. In 1944, when the nineteen-year-old Fanon was stationed outside of Casablanca, his Free French division was organized hierarchically, with European volunteers and fighters from the West Indian colonies like himself positioned at the top, Senegalese and sub-Saharan infantry at the bottom, and Moroccan and Algerian troops in between. At times the French commanders would "whiten" the army, leaving out Senegalese troops but taking only Moroccan and Algerian fighters or, better yet, just the French Maquis. The racial practices that Fanon witnessed within the army in colonial North Africa would inspire the Martinican to call for a Pan-African anti-imperialism, based on solidarity between "Negroes and Arabs."

In her recent book, *Maghreb Noir,* historian Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik describes how North African capitals were vibrant centers of pan-Africanism from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. From 1956 to 1961 when Morocco was part of the Non-Aligned Movement and "the Casablanca bloc," Rabat was home to various liberation movements (Tolan-Szkilnik, 2024). The Bissau-Guinean theorist-revolutionary Amílcar Cabral and the Angolan poet-revolutionary Mario de Andrade of the MPLA were based in the Moroccan capital. Nelson Mandela and Frantz Fanon were attending training camps in Oujda. For almost two decades, Rabat, Algiers, Tunis, and Cairo were, at different times, centers of African liberation movements and pan-Africanist intellectual networks. Upon assuming power in 1961, King Hassan began to shift the kingdom, away from the non-Aligned movement towards the pro-American camp. African liberation movements a

Pan-African intellectuals would depart Morocco. This political turn and the crackdown in 1965 on student and worker protests would inspire left-leaning Moroccan intellectuals to launch the magazine *Souffles*, a pan-African, Tri-continental publication, which published its first issue in Rabat in 1966. *Souffles (Anfas* in Arabic) was launched by a handful of Moroccan writers and poets in Paris, who were writing for Présence Africaine. The founders of *Souffles* – poet Abdelatif Laâbi, Mustafa Nissabouri, Mohammad Khaïr-Eddine, Mohammed Melihi, Mohamed Chabaa, and Farid Belkahia saw the Martinican thinkers Aimé Cesaire and Frantz Fanon as "elder brothers," but they were most galvanized by the Fanon's theory of national culture and liberation. Fanon's thought would become central to the *Souffles-Anfas* project.

In dialogue with writers in Francophone and Lusophone Africa, France, and the Caribbean, Souffles would emerge as a flagship publication of the Moroccan Left, a platform for debates about the definition of Africa and the meaning of Negritude. The Souffles collective supported Fanon's critique of Senghor. Fanon acknowledged that by affirming a black past, Negritude could help colonized Africans develop a positive sense of self. He granted that Aimé Cesaire's writings had helped spark a political awakening among West Indians. But, Fanon found the language of Negritude totalizing and echoing of colonial stereotypes; knowledge of black history was inspiring but talk of a "mythical past" was unproductive. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon observes that extolling the greatness of Songhai civilization would do little to help the exploited Songhai. In privileging "race" and ignoring class conflict, Negritude enabled bourgeois rule and by extension neo-colonialism.

To be sure, Aimé Cesaire – who coined the idea of Negritude – was also a major reference point for the *Souffles* collective. Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine's explosive 1964 poem "Nausée Noire (Black Nausea)" about a brutal head of state, was clearly influenced by Cesaire's classic poem *Cahier de Retour.* But in the debate about Negritude, the *Souffles* journal solidly backed Fanon's class-based critique, publishing a number of critiques by Marxist pan-Africanists. The most well know was the Haitian poet René Depestre's address at the Cultural Congress of Havana in January 1968 titled "The Winding Course of Negritude." Similarly, in April 1966, the late Moroccan art critic Abdullah Stouki penned a scathing review of the Dakar International Festival for Negro Arts that Senghor organized. He lamented the absence of progressive voic

like Paul Robeson and the anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba, noting that Senghor was holding a festival under the patronage of General de Gaulle and John F. Kennedy. Senghor would respond to the Fanonists that he saw cultural values as conditioned by geography, history, and the ethnic and racial group, adding that race is not a physical community, but a cultural community.

The rivalry between the leftist continental pan-African camp and the Negritude-inspired pro-Western camp, played out – and still plays out - at cultural festivals. The Pan-African Cultural festival held in Algiers in July 1969, was partly a response to Senghor's festival in Dakar. A 3000-word Pan-African Cultural Manifesto was reprinted in *Souffles* as a critique of Senghor's division of Africa into a "Berber-Arab" zone (with its "Bedouin virtues") and a "Negro-African world." In a 40-minute taped message, Ahmed Sekou Touré of Guinea, a rival of Senghor, repudiated the Senegalese president's ideology. The response to Sekou Touré was read by the distinguished Senegalese diplomat Mohtar M'Bow, who would later become the general director of UNESCO and a close associate of Leopold Senghor and King Hassan II. M'Bow argued that Negritude represented an intellectual-political bridge between Arabism and the "Negro-African world." These tensions would erupt again eight years later, when Nigeria decided to host the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) as a follow-up to the Dakar festival. From the outset, Senghor demanded that North African states only have observer status at the festival. His minister of culture said Senegal would boycott the event if it was not limited to Black countries only. General Obasanjo of Nigeria, however, wanted the North African states to participate as full members, and Nigerian officials - as *The New York Times* reported – would accuse the Senegalese of exhibiting "racial bigotry in the most nauseating sense" (Darnton, 1976). It has since been argued that Senghor opposing the participation of North African states, because of alleged Algerian political agitation.[1]

In 1972, *Souffles* was shut down, and the editors arrested. The pan-African left would be repressed across North Africa. The Black Panthers would depart Algeria; Samir Amin, David Dubois, and the Marxists would leave Cairo for Dar Es Salaam and then Dakar. *Souffles* was at

[1] This argument has been made by the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "African Humanitie Workshop, UM6P University, Ben Geruir, Morocco, December 16, 2024

the center of the debate over Pan-Africanism. After its shutdown, for several years there was little Pan-African organizing in North Africa, and few intellectual ties between Morocco and the rest of Africa – until the late 1970s when a new initiative was launched in Asilah centered around Leopold Senghor.

Cairo to Asilah:

By the late 1970s, as North African states shifted rightward, a new Pan-Africanist discourse centered on identity and civilization began germinating - briefly in Egypt, but mostly Morocco. In February 1967, Senghor had been invited to Egypt by Gamal Abdel Nasser, where he delivered a lecture at Cairo University on the foundations of Africanité (Azeb, 2019). Senghor argued that most African leaders were conceiving of African unity as based on anti-colonialism. This was not a pro-active, positive foundation for unity. Senghor wanted to identify values common to all Africans. The Senegalese president explained that the foundations of Africanité are essentially cultural, based on the "complementary symbiosis of the values of Arabité and the Negritude." He would distinguish his vision of African civilization from the Casablanca bloc's anti-colonial politics, insisting that "Arab and Negro" were simply different ways of being African. The poet-president was clearly distancing himself from Fanon's revolutionary vision of Black and Arab anti-colonial solidarity, but he was also subtly countering historian Cheikh Anta Diop's vision of Pan-Africanism. Diop, a vocal critic and political opponent of Senghor, did not draw a cultural boundary across the desert, and saw Egypt as a source of African civilization, not as part of a separate civilization. "Egypt is to the rest of black Africa what Greece and Rome are to the West," Diop would write (Gray, 1989, p. 20).

Senghor's civilizational project received a tepid response in Nasserist Egypt. The Egyptian president had his own vision of Arab-African-Islamic concentric relations based on anti-imperialism. Four years later, however, Senghor would find himself back in the Egyptian capital, this time at the behest of Anwar Sadat. The Egyptian president of Sudanese descent would find Senghor's talk of spirituality, African-Arab symbiosis, and pro-Westernism appealing. The duo would form a friendship and broach the idea of establishing a Francophone university in Egypt named after the Senegalese poet (the Senghor University of Alexandria would open its doors

1990). With Egypt's suspension from the Arab League in 1979, Sadat and Senghor would consider forming an Afro-Arab international organization.

In the mid-1970s, Mohammed Benaissa was a young journalist and international civil servant official working for the UN in Ghana and considering returning to Morocco for a run at political office. A quadra-lingual native of Asilah, Benaissa had grown up under the Spanish Protectorate, spent his high school years in Cairo, thanks to a scholarship from the Arab League – and attended the University of Minnesota in the early 1960s (along with future Ghanaian diplomat Kofi Annan.) Upon graduating from college in 1963, Benaissa had settled in Harlem, New York, doing an internship at the United Nations and taking classes at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. Benaissa would often recall living on 190th and Broadway, visiting churches on Sunday mornings and attending Black nationalist rallies. He would describe the Sunday afternoon in February 1965, when he was taking a train down to the United Nations, when the train was suddenly delayed on 125th Street, as police flooded the station. A man would come aboard and cry, "They shot Malcolm X."

Benaissa would subsequently join the Food and Agriculture Association of the UN (FAO), serving for eleven years in Accra, Rome, and Adis Ababa, Ethiopia (alongside Kofi Annan). In 1971, he met Senghor in Dakar, and they would strike up a friendship, brainstorming ways to build bridges across the Sahara. In 1976, Benaissa returned to Morocco, assuming the position of city councilman and eventually mayor of Asilah. He would go on to become Morocco's Minister of Culture, Minister of Foreign Affairs, ambassador to Washington through much of the 1990s, and would remain until his death in February of this year, an elder statesman of the Moroccan government.

In 1978, Benaissa and the Asilah-born painter Mohammed Melihi founded a cultural association called Al-Mouhit [The Ocean], that hoped to leverage art and culture for development and for the restoration of the old city of Asilah. Intrigued by Senghor and Sadat's idea of an Afro-Arab international organization, Benaissa would use the association to launch a local initiative called the Afro-Arab Cultural Forum *(al-muntada al-thaqafi al-arabi al-ifriqi)* based in Asilah. A founding charter would be signed a year later in Amman, Jordan, by Leopold Senghor and Pr

Hassan of Jordan, the latter was invited by Benaissa to fill in for the Egyptian president. In 1978, Benaissa would invite the artists and writers who had left *Souffles* when it took a Marxist turn in 1967 - Mohammed Melihi, Fareed Belkahia and Tahar Benjelloun - to join the Asilah project. Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, Egyptian writer Nawal al Saadawi, and Senegalese politician Mohtar M'Bow would also join the Afro-Arab collective. Benaissa would note that maybe one day the Asilah Forum could be expanded into a broader Afro-Arab organization, but the first step was an annual conference to build an intellectual network, alliances and an archive. The founding charter states: "The recommendations adopted by the Second Forum should be taken into account in the preparation of the draft programs, particularly those relating to the establishment of a data bank and Arab-African cooperation in the cultural field."

From 1980 until 1999, African, Arab, and Latin American writers, intellectuals, and politicians would meet annually at the coastal town in August for a cultural festival, that would include dialogue sessions presided over by Senghor and Benaissa. From the start, the Afro-Arab forum envisioned a tri-continental geography similar to that advanced by Souffles magazine, with Morocco as a bridge between Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and with a keen interest in Andalusian influence among "the peoples of Latin America" (Al-Alam, 2008, p. 247). In addition to the Afro-Arab forum, Benaissa would launch a summer institute called "La Universidad Ibero-Americana-Marroqui al-Mu'tamid Ibn Abbad," that aimed to connect Morocco to the Spanish-speaking world, and invited Latin American writers like Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado (Al-Alam, 2008, p. 240).

Berbéritude:

When historians of Berber/Amazigh culture discuss Senghor's impact on Morocco, the focus tends to be on Senghor's friendship with the Berber politician Mahjoub Aherdane, and more broadly on Negritude's influence on the Amazigh cultural movement (Peyron, 2022, p. 247; El Guabli, 2022). Senghor introduced the idea of Berbéritude at a speech he gave at l'Académie Française in 1980 (Delcour, 1980).[2] In November 1981, the Senegalese president would

[2] "Repondant au roi au nom des members etrangers, le president Senghor a celebré "le double métissage biologi et culturel qui fait les grands civilisations" et qui, au maroc, a allié "la berbéritude et l'arabité."

participate in a conference in Rabat with a range of Amazigh leaders including Aherdane, scholar Mohammed Chafik, and Abdelhamid Zemmouri, who had founded the Association Culturelle Amazighe in 1979.[3] Yet all this came on the heels of the Afro-Arab forum, which was more focused on Negritude's relationship to Arabité (than to Amazighité), and both identities' links to the Francophone and Hispanophone worlds across the Atlantic.

The Omani Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui coined the term "Afro-Arab" in the 1960s, first to describe the mixed populations of the Gulf and the Swahili coast – what he would also call "Afrabians – but also in reference to broader cultural and political overlap between Africa and the Arabic-speaking world. Mazrui had also spoken of "Arab Negritude," mostly referring to classical Arab poets who took pride in their dark skin. Benaissa knew the Kenyan historian and would often reference Mazrui's writings, but to his recollection, the two did not cross paths while at Columbia in the early 1960s. In Asilah, a different understanding of "Arab Negritude" would take shape, with the Moroccan-Senegalese relationship conceived as the foundation of a broader Afro-Arab relationship. As Benaissa would say, Asilah was to be "the seed" of a broader "complementarity" that would break down "the pseudo wall of the grand Sahara." And Senghor, Benaissa would write, was a perfect partner: wasn't Senghor the first sub-Saharan head of state to introduce Arabic into Senegal's educational system?[4] Senghor had envisioned Negritude as a universalism that included Arabité; the two were co-constitutive, with Arabic as a connector between the "Negro-African" and "Arabo-Islamic" civilizational spheres of Africa.[5] Benaissa hoped Asilah – "this little Afro-Arab town" ("cette petite ville Afro-Arabe") - could become a place to cultivate this vision, a space for the kind of cultural cross-breeding that Senghor had long called for: *le co-naitre* – co-birth.[6]

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[3] http://www.mondeberbere.com/azayku_bio_fr.html

[4] Benaissa writes: "N'est-il pas le premier Africain au sud du Sahara à avoir introduit la langue arabe dans les programmes d'en-seignement au Sénégal?" in Benaissa, "Léopold Sédar Senghor, l'Afrique, le monde et le siècle," *Présence Senghor: 90 Écrits En Hommage Aux 90 Ans Du Poète-Président UNESCO* (1997 ISSN collection) p.93

[5] In February 1969, at an address at the University of Algiers, Senghor had explained his decision to introduce Arabic to Senegalese students: "Si nous encourageons et si nous organisons scientifiquement l'enseignement de la langue et de la civilisation arabes à l'Université de Dakar, c'est parce que l'arabité fait partie du patrimoine culturel africain et que nous autres, de la civilisation nord- soudano-sahelinne, nous l'avons assimilée comme élément fécondant" (Léopold Senghor, *Liberté 3, Négritude et Civilisation de* l'Universel, Paris: Seuil, 1977).

[6] On the cultural commingling of North Africa, Senghor would write "l'universel c'est, pour vous Arabo-berbères, et pour commencer, la civilisation arabe," (Leopold Senghor, *Liberté III, Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (Editions du Seuil, Paris 1977, p.152).

From the outset, the Afro-Arab forum would award the Lepold Senghor prize for African Literature. In 1989, they began awarding the Tchicaya U Tamsi prize for African poetry – named after the late Congolese poet. In 1991, the prize was given to the Haitian poet René Depestre, another Marxist who had railed against Senghor's ideas while writing for Souffles. The awards committee would include the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Saleh, Paul Dabei of Cameroon, Henry Lopes of Congo, Edouard Maunick from Mauritius, and Charbel Daghel from Lebanon. In 1990, on the 10-year anniversary of the Afro-Arab forum, a ceremony was held in honor of Senghor. A plaza was built in central Asilah in the president's honor, using soil mixed by painter Farid Belkahia. Senghor was given a certificate – "the first certificate" – as citizen of Asilah. The event was attended by Prince Moulay Rachid of Morocco and Federico Mayor, the Spanish poet and director-general of UNESCO – who gave a stirring tribute to Senghor:

> This square which, on one side, is protected by high ancient walls which, if stones could speak, would tell us so many stories, and, on the other, opens out onto streets leading to the sea, in other words to other lands, to things universal, this square will then be called henceforth Leopold Sedar Senghor Square. All year-round men, women and children from Asilah and elsewhere will stop here. Some of them will utter and repeat the name, knowing who Senghor is; others will learn to read and pronounce the name, perhaps for the first time. They all will know, however, that this square honors a poet whose essential merit is that he has, through his work, which has been translated all over the world, opened up to the people of his native Senegal, to all Africa's peoples and, beyond this continent, to the black diaspora as a whole, the paths of dignity, notwithstanding the vicissitudes of history."[7]

In 1984, Morocco withdrew from the Organization of African Unity in 1984, following that organization's acceptance of the Sahraoui Arab Democratic Republic as a member state. This would imbue the Moroccan-Senegalese relationship with a new urgency. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Senghor was on the diplomatic circuit, extolling the kingdom as a paragon – a country that, like his native Senegal, was a brilliant mix of civilizations. It was in the 1980s, in Asilah, where the discourse of Morocco as a tree rooted in West Africa, with branches in Europe would congeal. In April 1980, when King Hassan inaugurated the Royal Academy in Fez, Senghor would praise the kingdom's cultural and biological metissage, the allying of "Berberitude and Arabité." In May 1987, at a joint event that he organized for the Moroccan royal academy and l'Académie Francaise, Senghor would explain that his aim was to use Morocco as a bridge to bring "Afro-Arab civilization" to the Francophone world, praising King Hassan as a central

[7] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000089410

figure of *l'Afro-Arabie* (Senghor, 1987). The Senegalese president and Moroccan monarch had been friends since 1974, joined by their love of the French language, opposition to Communism, and more. As philosopher Abdourahmane Seck observes, "Senghor and Hassan II were both obsessed with identity, and saw each other as gateways. They saw that they could enhance each other's prestige. Senghor, the father of Negritude, could boost Hassan II's reputation as a pan-African leader, and the Commander of the Faithful could reinforce Senghor's reputation as a nation builder and (Christian) leader of a Muslim nation."[8]

In 1997, on the occasion of Senghor's 90th birthday, UNESCO published a book of tributes to the Senegalese poet, including contributions from Aimé Cesaire, René Depestre, Tahar Benjelloun, and Boutros-Boutros Ghali, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, who would thank Senghor for helping deisolate Egypt in the 1970s. The collection also included a tribute from King Hassan. The monarch would praise the Senegalese poet-president for his humanism, for representing the spirit of evoking a number of tree-related aphorisms by Senghor: "l'arbre ne tombe pas s'il est l'esprit de l'arbre » ["The tree does not fall if it is the spirit of the tree."] (Hassan II, 1997, p. 23). He would also cite a well-known sentence from Senghor's 1977 book on Negritude and universalism: "For only a man firmly rooted in his original civilization can actively assimilate external contributions, like a tree which, planted in rich topsoil [humus], flourishes and blossoms in water and sunlight."[9] In March 1986, on Throne Day, the Moroccan monarch, echoing Senghor, had proclaimed "Morocco is a tree whose roots run deep into Africa and that breathes through its leaves in Europe" (Hibou & Tozy, 2020).

The UNESCO tribute came right on time. The 1990s was a challenging time for Negritude and civilizational arguments more broadly. In June 1993, Samuel Huntington published his infamous article, "The Clash of Civilizations," arguing that Islam's borders were bloody, and drawing a line across the Sahara separating Islamic and African civilizations. This thesis would draw much criticism and inspire a counter-discourse of anti-essentialism. Why the desire to reduce civilizations to an essence or "civilizational logic"? Why deploy the impossibly broad category

[8] Communication with author August 1, 2022.
[9] "Car seul l'homme solidement enraciné dans sa civilisation originaire peut assimiler activement les apports extérieurs, comme l'arbre qui, planté dans un riche humus, s'épanouit, fleurità l'eau et au soleil » (Leopold Sen *Liberté III, Négritude et civilisation de l'universel*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1977, p.152).

of civilization anyway? Negritude would come under similar critique for the civilizational-qua-culture-talk. Fanon's critique would be revived, as Senghor's thought was deemed as essentialist, evading questions of political economy and anti-imperialism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars would also begin to take stock of African leaders' views on decolonization, their stance during the Cold War, and Senghor's role as an anti-"progressive" ally of the US and France (Bonner, 2024; Dijan, 2005, p. 223-34). Critics would reference a meeting between Senghor and Jimmy Carter in 1978, where Senghor explains to the American president the three splits rending the African continent – between Francophones and Anglophones, between "Arabs and Negroes," and the gravest rift which was between moderates and Soviet-backed "progressives." Senghor would observe that Senegal was located in the middle of this Arab-Negro "dividing line" – not far from the civilizational fault-line that Huntington claimed divided Islamic and Negro civilization in Africa. The Senegalese president would note that the "progressive" states of Algeria and Libya were meddling in the Sahel, in Mali and Niger, threatening "to split all of these states," in an attempt to gain control over local Arab populations, when the truth is "hardly five percent of the people in the Sahara however are pure Arabs."[10]

After September 2001, public opinion would shift again. In November of that year, as the Bush administration embraced the discourse of "Clash of Civilizations," launching a war in Afghanistan, Kofi Anna would call for a Dialogue Among Civilizations, to counter extremism, eventually leading to the UN's Alliance of Civilizations in 2005, spearheaded by Spain and Turkey. Senghor's calls for a dialogue, reciprocity, and the "civilization of the universal" would find a new audience – and come to be seen as an antidote to the "clash of civilizations" rhetoric. In Morocco, as a discourse of Sufism and Afro-Convivencia was embraced, Senghor's ideas would be discussed at the Afro-Arab forum of Asilah,[11] and the Gnaoua festival and newly launched Andalusian festivals of Fez and Essaouira, all inspired by the Asilah festival. As

[10] "President Senghor pointed to one split in Africa between Arabs and Negroes. Algeria and Libya are playing on this. Senegal is on the dividing line and has removed both tribalism and religious wars. A more important split is the cultural one between Francophones and Anglophones. Senegal is combatting this by developing bi-lingualism. President Senghor said that the worst split in Africa is between "progressives" and moderates. The progressives, supported by the USSR and Eastern Europeans, seek to destabilize areas that they do not control. The OAU refuses to accept an East-West split in Africa and condemns intervention. Algeria however opposes Morocco and Mauritania and has intervened in Mali and Niger. They and the Libyans are interfering in the Western Sahara, and want to split all of these states to gain control of the Arab populations. Hardly five percent of the people in the Sahara however are pure Arabs." https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p2/d35

[11] https://www.jeuneafrique.com/219274/archives-thematique/quel-choc-des-civilisations/

Morocco geared up for a return to the African Union in 2017, the kingdom's historic ties to Senegal and the Sahel would be celebrated.

Senghor's thought nourished multiple intellectual currents in Morocco. The Senegalese poet and Amazigh politician Mahjoube Aherdan would organize gatherings on Amazigh culture. Senghor would write an epilogue to Aherdane's epic poem "Iguider ou le mythe de l'Aigle" (1990), stating the Moroccan writer's symbiosis of Berbéritude and Arabité, reflected an African form of humanism. The Senegalese poet would also curiously observe that before Phoenicians, Romans, Greeks, and Arabs arrived in Africa, Africa's populations weren't divided into White and Black, but rather into "Grand Africains" (Big Africans) who lived in northern Africa down to the Sahel, and "Petits Africains" (Little Africans) who lived beneath the Sahara and spoke "click languages" (Aherdan, 1990, p. 69-70).[12] Anthropologist Bouazza Benachir, a friend of the Senelagese poet, is another Moroccan intellectual inspired by Senghor as seen in his works *Le siècle de Léopold Sédar Senghor* (2006) and *Négritudes du Maroc et du Maghreb* (2011.) Morocco's current minister of museums the poet-painter Mehdi Qotbi, was also a protegé of the Senegalese president, who dubbed him "the magical Afro-Arab poet."

The Afro-Arab forum, now in its 45th year, set the cultural stage for Morocco's current Africa orientation and festivals policy, and for the rise of Gnawa music. American jazz artists and Gnawa musicians had been jamming at Dar Gnawa in Tangier since the 1960s, and Randy Weston's *Blue Moses* album (1972) record included Sufi chants, and the follow-up record, *Tanjah* (1974), included chants and oud. But the first recording of a live Gnawa-jazz session was *Asilah 80* (1980), featuring English pianist Peter Lemer and the G'Naoua d'Asilah at the local Al-Kamra Theatre. As Asilah became a musical destination, Moroccan cultural officials would see the possibilities of this musical fusion and launch the Essaouira festival in 1997, which is today one of the largest jazz festivals in Africa.

In August 2015, on the eve of Morocco's return to the African Union, Benaissa gave a speech in Asilah, laying out his vision of Morocco's place in the continent and the Afro-Arab future. Evoking Senghor again, he observed that the universal was "the local without walls." He spoke

[12] I am grateful to Aomar Boum for directing me Leopold Senghor's contribution to this volume.

of mirroring between Morocco and Senegal, and between Africa and Europe. He emphasized the obligation to cultivate local knowledge of Africa, the need to challenge colonial taxonomies, especially the distinction between "Black Islam" and "Arab Islam."[13] Praising the 13th century Malian sovereign Sundiata Keita, founder of the Manden Charter, one of the earliest documents to speak of human rights and pluralism, Benaissa called for a repudiation of "Afro-pessimism." He would conclude with a reference to the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne's idea of *ubuntu*, "becoming human together, in reciprocity." Mohammed Benaissa died on February 28, 2025, a few months before the Forum was to celebrate its 45th year. This year's conference is now set to commemorate Asilah's eminent native son and his half-century effort to make his hometown a focal point in the Afro-Arab world.

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[13] Mohammed Benaissa, "Africa in the Mirror of Europe," a version of the address would be published: https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2024--issue-no-27/africa-in-the-mirror-of-europe

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Decolonizing the Desert: Saharan Arab Nationalism in the Writings of Muhammad Qashat

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In the early 1970s, the Libyan scholar, poet, and journalist Muhammad Qashat arrived at an isolated oasis in the Western Sahara. Upon meeting the Sahrawi inhabitants of the oasis, he waxed poetic about the people's unique relationship with the desert. "There where the Sahara extends with its acacia and thorns and juniper trees, between the sands and the ocean, between the painful present and the glorious past, there spread the Arab tents," Qashat wrote in his narrative of the journey: "A branch of the *umma* from which they have been isolated, moving on the backs of camels, [...] the sun has increased the brown-ness of these Arabs to another degree, but it was not able to hide the glimmer of hope in their eyes shining towards a better future" (Qashat, 1989b, p. 47).[1] Qashat, who lived most of his life among various communities around the Sahara, was enchanted by the desert as a space both beautiful and terrible. "I have loved this desert since my youth," he wrote in a later scholarly publication: "I have exalted it and seen to its needs north and south, east and west, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Tibesti Mountains. [I am dedicated to] this desert which embraces us with its violence, and which pushes us into the face of intruders with its calmness" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 7-8). The contrast between peace and violence was more than merely rhetorical flourish; it reflected Qashat's role as a scholar-activist and promoter of revolutionary armed struggle.

Qashat had come to the Western Sahara as an emissary of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's Libyan Arab Republic, hoping to make contact with members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario) then engaged in an armed rebellion against Spain's colonial occupation of the Sahara. Qashat was something of a professional provocateur, having

[1] Mohammad Qashat, *Min Dhofar ila Sagia al-Hamra* (Beirut: Dar Lubnan lil-Taba'a wa al-Nashr): 47.

previously liaised with the Dhofari rebels in Oman and disaffected Tuareg nationalists in Niger and Mali on behalf of the Qaddafi regime. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Libya was attempting to claim the mantle of anti-colonial Arab nationalism left vacant by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's death in 1970. Often mocked or dismissed out of hand, Qaddafi's foreign policy was in fact a well-calculated attempt to activate the anti-imperial, nationalist, and Islamist sentiments of people living in a rapidly decolonizing Northwest Africa. Qashat's work provided scholarly justification for Libyan leadership through an ethnographic account of the ties of race, environment, lineage, and language which bound the inhabitants of the Sahara. This capacious notion of Afro-Arab identity allowed Qashat to sidestep centuries of thorny debates over ethnic, racial, and linguistic differences through an emphasis on shared Islamic tradition and desert lifestyle. Qashat's primary concern was the struggle against continuing Western imperialism, for which the rugged Saharan landscape offered the ideal platform for armed resistance. Stressing the Sahara's Arab and Islamic traditions, he tended to elide the ethnic and racial particularities of African groups like the Tuareg. This paper reads Qashat's journalistic and historical works to analyze his particular brand of Saharan Arab nationalism. Taking seriously the revolutionary commitments of Qaddafi's Libya, Qashat emerges as a significant thinker and scholar-activist of the transnational Afro-Arab Left in the closing decades of the 20th century.

Qashat's Role in Qaddafi's Revolutionary Foreign Policy

Mohammad Said Qashat was born in al-Jawsh, Libya in 1942 and educated first in Tripoli then Cairo. Between 1959 and 1962 he taught at a primary school in Ghat, in the far southwestern corner of Libya, where he became familiar with the anti-colonial currents then sweeping the central Sahara. A prolific poet and amateur ethnographer, his writings brought him to the attention of the Libyan state. Following the coup of Qaddafi's Free Officers Movement in 1969, Qashat was named director of the new Center for Studies and Research of Saharan Affairs in 1972, a position which he would hold for many years.

In 1969, Libya's King Idriss I was overthrown by an Arab nationalist group of army officers. Qaddafi's Libyan Arab Republic was guided by an anti-colonial ideology which sought to advance armed revolution across the region. Throughout the 1970s, Qaddafi redirected Libya

oil wealth into military projects as he sought to destabilize political regimes in neighboring countries like Chad, Tunisia, and Mali which he argued were neocolonial puppets of the West.[2] In a remote terrain where both local and colonial state power had always been weak, the national loyalties of many Saharans were still potentially up for grabs in the 1970s and 80s. Libya's revolutionary efforts should thus be understood as a significant factor in the longue durée decolonization of the Sahara which, Mark Dury has argued, "entailed border making processes and intensified efforts to fix the political affiliations of its peoples" (Drury, 2022, p.3). Qashat was a key agent of these Libyan policies, as he worked to identify disaffected political constituencies and activate tribal and religious networks across the Sahara. While Qashat was director of the Center for Saharan Affairs, Libya was engaged in a decade-long armed conflict in Chad (1978-1987) via Islamist proxies like the Fronte de libération nationale du Tchad (FROLINAT), as well as a sponsor of Tuareg opposition groups in Niger and Mali like the Front populaire pour la libération du Sahara Arabe Central (FPLSAC). Libya provided the movement with funding and military training, and even arranged for some FPLSAC fighters to participate in the Lebanese Civil War (Lecocq, 2010, p. 286-88).

In this light, the Center for Studies and Research on Saharan Affairs appears as a soft power element of Libya's revolutionary policies in the Sahel. It capitalized on the goodwill of Saharan communities for the Qaddafi regime, whose redistribution of oil wealth made Libya into an island of prosperity during harsh droughts which shook the region in the 1970s (Kohl, 2010). As director of the Center, Qashat produced dozens of ethnographies, poetry collections, and biographical dictionaries seeking to advance his ideology of Saharan Arab nationalism which bound the region's inhabitants together in anticolonial struggle. Qashat's Saharan nationalism was distinct from Nasserist Pan Arabism in its attention to marginal communities like the Sahrawis and Dhofaris, its emphasis on the desert as a constituent element of Arab identity, and its flexible inclusion of indigenous African groups like the Amazigh, Tubu, and Tuareg. Although this paper analyzes Saharan Arab nationalism as an idiosyncratic personal project of Qashat, it was part of a broader ideology of Afro-Arab anticolonial struggle which the Qaddafi regime developed in various scholarly publications and media strategies. Qashat was joined in

[2] Libya's military budget more than doubled over the course of the 1970s. See Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 169.

the Libyan government by the Sudanese-born poet of "Songs of Africa," Muhammad al-Fayturi, who served as Libya's ambassador to Morocco and Lebanon in the 1970s (Frangieh, 2017). In the same period, the state also sponsored Syrian director Moustapha Akkad's big-budget 1981 film "Lion of the Desert," starring Anthony Quinn as Libyan anti-colonial fighter Omar al-Mukhtar (Twair, 2006, p. 48-9). Although the Center for Saharan Affairs was headquartered in Tripoli, its works were republished in places as far afield as Tunis, Cairo, Beirut, and even Cagliari, Italy, providing some evidence for the influence and reach of Qashat's ideas.[3]

This paper uses several major Qashat publications to analyze his vision of Saharan Arab nationalism. *From Dhofar to Sagia Hamra* records two trips Qashat took in 1972 and 1973, respectively, to visit representatives of the armed revolutions then happening in Oman and Western Sahara. In pairing the two accounts together, Qashat explicitly connects revolutions against Spanish colonialism and British neo-colonialism as part of the same Pan-Arab struggle rooted in isolated geographies. *The Tuareg: Arabs of the Sahara* is an ethnographic account of the namesake Saharan ethnic group published in 1987. Based on Qashat's travels and participant observation in various communities across the Central Sahara, it argues for the Tuareg's inclusion in the Arab *umma*. *The Jihad of Libyans Against France in the Sahara* is a historical account of various armed anti-colonial movements in the Sahara, published in 1989. Concerned primarily with tribal genealogy and hagiographic biographies of Saharan mujahidin, the work depicts a century-long civilizational conflict between French colonialism and the Libyans who bravely stood to oppose them. Together, these three works serve as a rich corpus to understand how Qashat linked ethnic identity, revolutionary struggle, and desert landscapes together in his vision of Saharan Arab nationalism.

Ethnographies of the Sahara

Contemporary scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that the production of scholarly knowledge was a key element of French rule in North, West, and Central Africa. Colonial administrators worked closely with linguists, ethnographers, and sociologists to understand the populations they governed, making them legible for taxation, conscription, and discipline

[3] Baz Lecocq claims that, as one of the few published works available on local history and culture, *The Tuareg* was particularly widespread and influential among Tuareg nationalist circles of the 1980s (Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 281).

(Burke, 2014). Divide and rule strategies called for the identification and reification of distinct racial and ethnic groups, as demonstrated by the infamous "Kabyle Myth" of French Algeria (Hannoum, 2001). As French rule extended into the Sahara in the latter half of the 19th century, colonial administrators struggled to navigate the harsh and inaccessible terrain. Indeed, Brahim El Guabli has argued that these qualities of the desert enabled the development of Saharanism, a style of Orientalist discourse founded on "the universalizing idea of deserts as empty and lifeless spaces, providing the conceptual justification for brutal, conscienceless, and life-threatening actions in desert environments" (El Guabli, 2022, p. 58). Having convinced themselves of the backwardness and intractability of Algerian Arabs, many French officials were in search of non-Arab local allies in the Sahara. As Benjamin Brower has argued, this led to the invention of a genealogy for the Tuareg as a pre-modern warrior class amenable to French ambitions of colonial domination. This process of Orientalist knowledge production had a strong racial dimension, as colonial discourses glorified the Tuaregs' strong physique and light skin; in the words of French ethnologist Henri Duveyrier "without [the Tuareg] the deserts they inhabit and that separate the white race from the black race would be impassable" (qtd. in Brower, 2009, p. 230.) In their quest to emphasize the Tuaregs' racial distinctness from the other inhabitants of the Sahel, French writers invented increasingly fanciful tales about these "alien invaders" of the Sahara, including origins among the ancient Vandals and the lost city of Atlantis (Lecocq, 2010, p. 99). Although the Tuareg never fulfilled expectations for reliable partnership, with sporadic armed resistance continuing across the Sahara and Sahel through the 1910s, French rule slowly extended across Central Africa; Chad was formally incorporated as a colony under civil administration in 1920 and Niger in 1922.

In North Africa, anticolonial movements like the FLN in Algeria and the Neo-Destour party in Tunisia articulated their demands for independence in the language of Arab nationalism. Yet in the Sahara and Sahel, colonial legacies complicated the relationships between race, ethnicity, and national identity. In the closing years of the 1950s, French officials created a new territorial in the Central Sahara called the *Organisation commune des régions sahariennes* (OCRS), hoping to insulate the region from the growing independence movements in Algeria and West Africa. They found a local ally in Timbuktu cleric Muhammad Mahmoud Ould al-Shaykh, whose Islamic scholarship and political activism had advocated for the sovereignty of Arab and Tuareg gro

in the region since the 1930s (Scheele, 2012, p. 140). Ould al-Shaykh became an enthusiastic supporter of the OCRS project, and with French sponsorship he embarked on an intense campaign of petitions, publications, and public lectures arguing that Saharan nomad communities formed a nation distinct from Sub Saharan African groups in Mali. Ultimately the OCRS collapsed and most of its territory was integrated into newly independent Mali, with the state's first president Modibo Keita condemning Ould al-Shaykh as a colonial toady who "created the myth of the nomad and the myth of the sedentary, the myth of the white and the myth of the black" (qtd. in Lecocq, 2010, p. 60). Yet the demands for Tuareg and Arab sovereignty persisted, leading to a series of armed conflicts beginning in 1963 with the Kidal Revolt and continuing into the present day.

Some scholars have emphasized how postcolonial politics were driven by racial animosities, rooted in local culture but exacerbated by French intervention in favor of 'white' Tuaregs and Arabs. Chouki El Hamel, for example, has argued that anti-Black racism became a defining aspect of Sahara society in the early modern period, with enslavement of Black Africans providing "the ideological foundation for a society divided by skin color" (El Hamel, 2013, p. 10). Bruce Hall extends these arguments in his history of race in West Africa. He argues that Ould al-Shaykh drew on nationalist vocabulary derived from the Arab *nahda* of the Middle East, introducing words like *watan* [nation/homeland], *sha'b* [people], and *zanj* [Black African] to create new racialized arguments about Saharan territory "that clearly followed the emerging logic of the nation state" (Hall, 2011, p. 303-306). From this perspective, Arab nationalist claims in the Sahara carry an undercurrent of colonialism and white supremacy.

Yet critics argue that it is inappropriate to project theories of race and slavery developed in a North American context onto Saharan history. Without apologizing for anti-Black racism, they caution against exporting a Black/white racial binary onto a region with complex histories of overlapping racial, ethnic, and religious identification. "Slavery does not in any way exhaust Morocco's historical ties with Africa, notably West Africa," writes Zakia Salime. "These ties were knotted in webs of exchanges between scholars, Sufi masters, students, spouses, trade partners, and more. They were strengthened later by dreams about liberation, Third-Worldism, and Pan-Africanism" (Salime, 2024). Mahmood Mamdani emphasizes that West African

identities were historically plural and mutable, with ethnicity and race only becoming exclusive identity categories in the colonial period. Historicizing race, he writes, requires "bringing to light how the precolonial was articulated with the colonial under terms shaped by colonial power" (Mamdani, 2018). Thus this essay's reading of Qashat's Saharan Arab nationalism will focus on the flexible and contingent ways in which he applies ethnic and racial identities to inhabitants of the region.

Qashat was an accomplished scholar who was fully aware of the thorny debates over race and ethnicity in the Sahara. He was conversant in French ethnographic scholarship, regularly citing early 20th century authorities like Paul Marty and Henri Lhote while also maintaining a healthy suspicion of their ultimate motives. "European spies assumed scientific airs, with the public intention of exploration and knowledge but with the real intention of colonizing the land, humiliating and conquering its people [sh'oub]," he writes of early exploratory expeditions in the Sahara, "Europeans analyze for themselves what they forbid to others" (Qashat, 1989a, 87-88). He matched European Orientalists in boots-on-the-ground experience, regularly boasting of his many years living with nomadic groups and enduring the hardships of desert life.[4] At the same time, he was also grounded in a centuries-long Arab historical tradition; his library included the works of classical historians like Ibn Khaldoun, al-Tabari, and al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan (Leo Africanus) as well as contemporaries like the Nigerien politician and professor André Salifou and the Mauritanian diplomat Muhammad Mahmoud Ould Dadi. These Saharan scholars, like Qashat himself, were simultaneously engaged in scholarly publication and the building of postcolonial nation states. Like Ould al-Shaykh, Qashat was also familiar with the Arab nationalist thought of writers like the Beirut-born Khayr al-Din al-Zirikli. Qashat's authority was ultimately grounded in his participation in the very movements he wrote about. His footnotes were as likely to reference interviews and personal correspondence with Saharan rebels as they were to cite French Orientalists; he was even more likely to cite his own extensive body of work on Saharan history and culture. Indeed, Qashat made few claims to scholarly impartiality and unabashedly directed political appeals to an Arabic readership steeped in anti-colonial nationalism. "As I write this book in 1988, we are still face to face with France in the Sahara," he

[4] Qashat details his three years of experience living with the Minghistan tribe of Darj, who "treated me like I was one of them." He learned the Tuareg language (Tamasheq) and alphabet (Tifinagh), and wore the Tuareg veil a turban until "there was no distinction between us" (Qashat, , p. 8-10).

concludes *Jihad of the Libyans* by asking his readers, "Will the revolution achieve victory, and remove France with no return? Or will the inhabitants of the Sahara decide to submit themselves under French wings?" (Qashat, 1989a, p.201). For Qashat, Saharan Arab nationalism was not merely a discursive tool but an all-encompassing national ideology and a daily practice which defined his life's work.

Saharan Arab Nationalism in Qashat's Work

The Sahara is a central theme across Qashat's many writings. He loved the desert's vast expanses, personifying it as a female companion with an alluring double nature. "She has greeted me with her storms of fury and her burning eastern winds; she has greeted me with her cold western winds in the dead of winter," he writes with poetic rhyme in the introduction to *Jihad of the Libyans*: "I have come to her in the summer when the lizard licks his lips from the heat of her sun, and I have come to her in the winter when the snakes cannot move from the bitterness of the cold" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 7). Despite its harshness, Qashat's Sahara hosts human inhabitants who, like the lizards, snakes, and gazelles, live in harmony with the environment. For him, the relationship between the desert and its people was timeless and immutable. Qashat mocked European claims of 'discovering' and 'mapping' the Sahara, writing that "for us Arabs of the region, the original inhabitants of the Sahara, we cannot put a date on our discovery of the Sahara, just as man cannot put a date to his discovery of speaking, singing, or dancing; or water and air; or light and dark" (Qashat, 1989a, p.22). Native Saharans have adapted to the desert's life threatening extremes through intimate knowledge of the terrain and improvements to its water sources. "Every time I wandered east and west through the Sahara," Qashat writes, "my appreciation and wonder increased for her noble people, who have laid out its paths, dug its wells, and connected its shores with great trust and patience" (Qashat, 1989a, p.9). He describes a symbiosis between human and natural world in which, in contrast to non-arid lands, the balance of power favors the environment. People must adapt to the desert, not the other way around. Far from being a problem to be overcome, Qashat embraced the austerity of the Saharan lifestyle for its purifying and edifying qualities. **"**Shepherding is the dominant profession," he writes, "which does not merely fill the time, but makes man more contemplative and closer to god, far from the city and its amusements, and the villages and their gatherings; it sends man

into the desert, and whenever he wanders he finds his cattle are his only goal" (Qashat, 1989a, p.24). Because "man is worth nothing in this desert," its inhabitants have an innate sense of determination and strength. When Qashat met Polisario fighters who had been imprisoned by Spanish colonial authorities, they told him that "entering prison has become something normal for Sahrawis, it is like a necessity of life in the Sahara" (Qashat, 1974, p. 89).

For Qashat, the modern history of the Sahara was defined by its inhabitants' struggle against European domination. He couches this struggle in religious, political, and nationalist terms, variously describing armed resistance efforts as jihad against a "French crusader invasion," a "defense of the homeland [*watan*] against internal colonialism," and a "revolution against imperial colonialism." He refuses the tendency of postcolonial historians to treat Saharan resistance movements as spatially and historically isolated to a particular national geography. Rather, he sees a pan-Saharan struggle against attempts to impose French sovereignty stretching from the early 19th century, when European explorers attempted their first trans-Saharan voyages, through the end of formal colonialism and into contemporary political struggles in the Sahel. Everyone from the Kanem-Bornu ruler Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi (d. 1837) to the Tuareg rebel Muhammad Kaocen (d. 1919) and the Tubu politician Goukouni Oueddei (president of Chad, 1979-1982), equally merits the title of Libyan mujahid. Qashat dismisses the modern borders between nation states like Libya, Niger, Chad, Tunis, and Mali as "walls imposed by the French and African reactionaries."[5] Global events like the World Wars and the Great Depression are subsumed within this master narrative, becoming mere backdrops to ongoing armed clashes between Saharan groups and colonial troops. Other colonial powers like Italy, Spain, and Britain are reduced to secondary roles in the overarching French drive to rule the Sahara. This anti-colonial framework structures all of Qashat's writing and activism.

[5] "Unfortunately," Qashat writes, "independence was merely a change in the face of colonialism, for the withdrawal of French forces from direct rule did not mean true independence, but simply the installation of French clients a head of these countries" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 195-197).

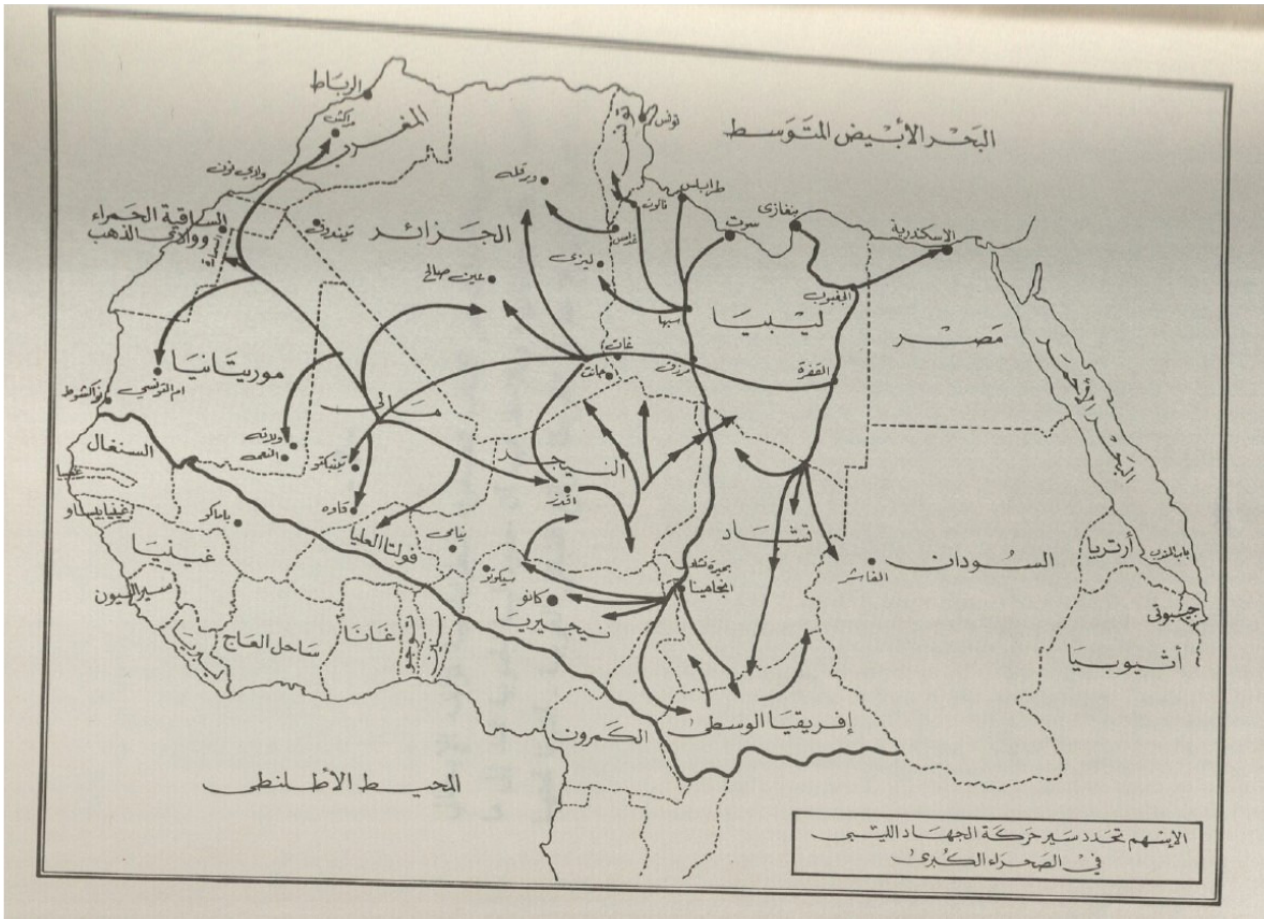


Figure 1 "Arrows showing the paths of movement of the Libyan jihad in the Sahara" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 310). In Qashat's geographical imaginary, the borders of postcolonial nation-states (represented by dotted lines) are less fixed and permanent than geographic.

Thankfully, native Saharans have been prepared for resistance by their desert lifestyle. For Qashat, the region's inhabitants share a cultural unity and vast freedom of movement, with wide-ranging political organizations like Sufi tariqas and tribal groupings facilitating alliances against European rule. Whereas French ethnographers developed paranoid obsessions with these networks as vehicles for a vast Muslim conspiracy, Qashat praised them for the same qualities. Whenever a rebellion was defeated in one location, jihadis could quickly share knowledge and resources to rekindle the revolution elsewhere. Thus, for example, Qashat claims that followers of the defeated Sahrawi jihadi Ma al-'Aynayn (d. 1910) regrouped to the leadership of Mohammed Kaocen during his 1917 revolt against French rule in Niger (Qashat, 1989a, p. 181). Indeed, the Sahara's very remoteness was the greatest asset of the out-gunned rebels. In his travels with armed groups in Dhofar and the Western Sahara, Qashat repeatedly praised the

revolutionaries' physical toughness and their ability to hide using rough terrain.[6] "In lopsided battles we achieved victory through our will and our faith," he writes, "and through the strength of our fighters in defending their lair the Sahara" (Qashat, 1989a, p.10). In this way, the desert proves to be the ideal place for anticolonial revolutions to launch. "The Qaddafi tribe played an important role in the jihad against Italy," he reminds readers, "using their knowledge of the unknown places in the Sahara to take refuge there as an impregnable shield" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 258).

This anecdote points to the prime goal of Qashat's various publications on the Sahara and its inhabitants. Ultimately, his work served to burnish the image and boost the revolutionary credentials of his patron, Muammar Qaddafi. Qashat's appeals to Pan-Arab sentiment in the 1970s and 80s were addressed to an audience living in the shadow of Egypt's humiliating loss to Israel in the 1967 war. Qaddafi modeled his early revolutionary movement on Nasser's Free Officer Movement in Egypt and moved quickly to claim leadership of revolutionary struggle in the Arab World following Nasser's death in 1970. With Egypt's turn to the neoliberal West and rapprochement with Israel under Anwar Sadat, Egyptian-Libyan relations quickly soured, resulting in a brief armed conflict in 1977. Qashat painted the pre-Sadat era as a golden age for Arab cooperation, boasting about collaboration between Libya and Egypt to support the anticolonial struggle in Algeria. He also reports a political summit at which Nasser supposedly told Qaddafi "I see myself in you as a young man" and later declaimed in a radio address that "I leave you safe in the hands of my brother Muamar Qaddafi, a champion for Arab nationalism" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 259-60). With Nasser's fiery rhetoric still within living memory for most Arabic readers, it must certainly have been tempting to harness that image to Libyan leadership. Yet, as other scholars have noted, Qaddafi's brand of Arab nationalism had even broader ambitions than Nasser's, with a pronounced turn to Global and Pan African struggle at the end of the 1970s (Sicker, 1987). Qashat reflects these tendencies when he concludes *Jihad of the Libyans* with the grandiose claim that "Qaddafi was able to meet attack with attack, arms with arms, and force with force […] For the first time in nearly a hundred years of our conflict with the French the battle has moved to more places, and the globe has become a theater for the

[6] In one humorous incident, Qashat recounts how the young revolutionaries jumped and leapt their way up a mountain path while he and the other journalists struggled along behind them (Qashat, *Min Dhofar ila Sagia al-Hamra*, p. 33).

conflict between us and the enemy, between the supporters of freedom and the supporters of colonialism" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 260).

In burnishing the reputation of his patron, Qashat's Saharan Arab nationalism often asserted Libyan chauvinism at the expense of neighboring countries, and his praise for Qaddafi sometimes stretched the limits of belief. He notably declined to include icons of Algerian nationalism like Emir Abdelkader and Ahmed Bouzian in his list of Saharan jihadis, and he pointedly criticized Moroccan and Mauritanian policies in Western Sahara.[7] In justifying his use of the title *Jihad of the Libyans* to describe the history of anti-colonial resistance across the Sahara, he writes that "I have specified the Libyans because they alone are still carrying the burden of countering the French expansion in the Sahara; though this does not diminish from the value of the jihad announced by their brothers in religion and nationality (*qawmia*) across the Sahara" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 11). Yet elsewhere in the book he dismisses neighboring countries like Chad and Niger as "natural extensions" of Libya, and goes so far as to claim that "thousands of Libyans are found in Egypt, so its land is considered an extension of the land of Libya. There are no natural barriers, just as the inhabitants are of the same lineages and origins […] most of the citizens from Alexandria to the border with Libya are Libyans." Writing in 1988, at the end of nearly a decade of Libyan intervention and armed conflict with the central government in Chad, Qashat's declaration that "Libyans are in favor of revolution and liberation, for the Islam of Chad and the Arabness of Chad [while] France is in favor of the occupation of Chad" was a self-interested claim that would have convinced few outside of Qaddafi's orbit.[8] Nonetheless, Qashat remained committed to a Saharan Arab nationalism which united marginal groups across the region under Libyan leadership. He continued to promote anticolonial struggle at a time when other Arab states were seeking political accommodation with their former colonial powers, and perhaps this explains his ideology's appeal despite its obvious biases towards the Libyan state. On his trip to Dhofar, he quoted an anonymous Dhofari fighter begging for solidarity from fellow Arabs and praising Libya as the inspiration for further revolution: "we revolted for the

[7] "Why was Libya the only voice in the Organization of African Unity in 1971 calling to add Sagia al-Hamra to the list of African regions that must be liberated?" Qashat asks. "[The Sahrawis] found themselves like a sheep divided by the surrounding countries" (Qashat, *Min Dhofar ila Sagia al-Hamra*, p. 92-93).

[8] "The French support the occupation of Chad, the Frenchness of Chad and the division of Chad," Qashat writes: "They support spreading division amongst its tribes, and the persecution of Muslims in Chad. They support trea them like second class citizens and crushing the Arab race (*ansar*) in the region" (Qashat, 1989, p. 75-77).

sake of Arab dignity [...] is this not the freedom which you call for in Libya? [...] is this not the socialism you call for? We revolted for the sake of stopping the partition of the region as a first step to full Arab unification that you are calling for" (Qashat, 1974, p.22).

Negotiating Ethnic Difference Within Saharan Arab Nationalism

Qashat's Saharan Arab nationalism highlighted the tensions between universal claims and local realities inherent to any national project. The Sahara was home to a great diversity of people, which colonial ethnographers had preferred to categorize along ethnic and racial lines. Qashat, by contrast, stressed the essential cultural unity of these groups as Saharan Arabs alike in their Islamic faith, prophetic descent, and desert lifestyle. His attention and praise for rural and nomadic populations like the Sahrawis, Tuareg, and Dhofaris, so long marginalized in the urban politics of the Mashriq, revealed the shortcomings of mainstream Pan Arabism. Indeed, his trips to Dhofar and Sagia al-Hamra introduced him to communities fighting not just European colonial occupation but also postcolonial states (Morocco and Oman) which were nominally committed to Pan Arab nationalism. His writings reflect a period, before the rise of movements for local independence and cultural autonomy, when the appeal of anticolonialism was still strong enough to constitute a basis for regional Saharan Arab solidarity.

For Qashat, the relationship between the Sahara and its Arab inhabitants preceded historical time. He draws on genealogical understandings of Arab identity, grounded in Islamic tradition, while avoiding a master narrative of migration and assimilation. Qashat's Saharan Arab nationalism revealed the persistence of precolonial modes of identification in which Arabness was capacious and flexible. Because political authority in the region had long been based on descent from the Prophet Muhammad, West African rulers from groups like the Hausa, Fulani, and Kanembu all claimed descent from Arabian tribes and therefore qualified for inclusion in Qashat's Saharan Arab community. "The talk of the Arab migrations after the Islamic conquest, and that they Arabized the region, is naive," he declared emphatically. "The inhabitants of North Africa were Arab before Islam, cherishing their Qahtani Arab lineage before the arrival of the prophet and before the Arabs of the Mashriq knew anything about Islam" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 37). The reference to the Mashriq betrayed a certain resentment of the cultural and political

dominance of the Arab East, against which Qashat was eager to demonstrate the learning and progress achieved by Arab Islamic civilization in the Sahara. This includes refuting stereotypes of the region as backward and superstitious. "The Sahrawis love freedom," he wrote of the Western Sahara, "and their Arabness and their religion are very dear to them. They follow Arab news and they know what happens everywhere. The East has a distorted view of Sagia al-Hamra, for in general opinion it is a center of fqihs, sorcerers and witchcraft" (Qashat, 1974, p.57). On the contrary, he argues, the Sahara had been the cradle from which "the Almoravid revolution exploded to save the Arabs on the shores of al-Andalus" (Qashat, 1974, p. 47).

Local ethnic and linguistic variation across the Sahara could exist alongside these claims of Arab identity without apparent contradiction or conflict. Qashat gestured towards multiculturalism in his praise of the ancient Arab roots of the Hassaniyya, Tamasheq, and Mehri languages, as well as his pledge that the Libyan state "will play a role in restoring [the Sahara] and maintaining the mosaic tableau of its people" (Qashat, 1989a, p.12). Arabness was fundamental but did not necessarily preclude the adoption of other ethnic identities; in Qashat's Sahara, it was possible to be both Arab and Tuareg, Berber, or Fula. Alongside his insistence that the Sahara's Arabness preceded the Islamic conquests, he also discussed the ancient migration of "Arab tribes" like the Sanhaja and Hausa who "mixed with the black inhabitants [*zunouj*] of the region, forming points of contact and intermixture, around 10 degrees latitude north, taking from the Sahara a shield to defend against enemies from the north: Romans, Vandals and others" (Qashat, 1989a, p. 16). Thus the intermarriage and "mixing" of Arab and Black African groups produced much of the local ethnic variation found in the Sahel. Yet these local particularities should never eclipse the importance of establishing an Arab-Islamic basis for Libyan leadership of revolutionary struggle. Indeed, Qashat was suspicious of attempts to reify ethnic identities in opposition to the essential Arabness of the Sahara, seeing such discursive maneuvers as colonial tricks. The Tuareg leader Kaocen, he writes, was "an Arab African mujahid [...] not acknowledged in the borders which the colonizer drew and not recognized among the ethnicities (*jinsiyyat*) which the ruling regime in the Arab Islamic countries imposed on the Sahara" (Qashat, 1999, p. 2-3). Thus Qashat's nationalism has an anti-sectarian character in the way it could include so many diverse groups under the larger banner of Saharan Arab identity.

This flexibility is particularly evident in Qashat's treatment of the Tuareg, or "the Arabs of the Sahara" as the subtitle of his book indicates. He demonstrates the ancient roots of Tuareg culture in Arab language and genealogy. "The Tuareg are a Muslim Semitic people (*sha'b*) guarding their original civilizational identity," he writes, "and their national language is Tamasheq [...] one of the old dialects of Arabic which Islam perfected when it united the languages of the Arabs with the language of the Quraysh."[9] As discussed above, in the 1970s, the Qaddafi regime identified dissident Tuareg groups in Niger and Mali as potential allies in the Central Sahara. To further these aims, Qashat was at pains to stress the intertwined nature of Arab and Tuareg lineages. The Tuareg are not racial others, as colonial ethnography suggested, but close kin and allies in the fight against colonialism. Thus, for example, he writes that "I found many Tuareg elders trace their descent to the Arabs, they guard their family trees in their pocket or in lockboxes, showing their origins in the Quraysh or Prophet" (Qashat, 1989b, p. 83). Qashat goes on to quotes approvingly from Ibn Khaldoun that there is no difference between Arabs and Berbers, for it is "well known that they are all from Yemen," and recounts a poem of Tuareg elder Mohammed Mbarek al-Lamtouni "which shows the Tuaregs' recognition of their Arab descent from the Hamiri and the Quraysh." In Qashat's genealogical account, the two groups are so close that it is possible for Arab tribes to take on Tuareg identity as well as Tuaregs to take on Arab identity. Thus, for example, he claims that the Kel Afughas are the descendants of Moroccan sharif Mohammad al-Mokhtar, who settled in the Sahara and married a Tuareg woman. Their descendants became Tuareg because "children follow the mother according to the Tuareg custom (which is an ancient Arab custom)." Elsewhere, he asserts that Sahrawi tribes like the Tekna and Taghant "mixed with Arabs until they forgot Tuareg language and customs and became all Arabic speakers" (Qashat, 1989b, p. 98-99). He exploits the historical flexibility of local genealogical reckonings to include the Tuareg within his Saharan Arab nationalism.

Yet, Saharan Arab nationalism was not without its own contradictions. Because Arabs of the Sahara are by definition united against colonial occupation, local African agents of colonial rule are liable to fall beyond the bounds of the national community. This boundary making could take on a racial dimension, as Qashat's account of the 1963 Kidal Revolt against the Malian state

[9] Qashat also claims that Tamasheq is the "only African language" which uses the letter *daad* (ض) another common trope of nationalist thought which sometimes referred to the Arab people as the 'nation of *daad*' (*ahl al-daad*) (Qashat, *The Tuareg:* p. 29-36).

makes clear. With the failure of the OCRS, Qashat paints a bleak picture of the postcolonial Sahara as even worse than French colonialism. "When France withdrew they left all the administration in the hands of the *zunuj*," he laments, "and the Arabs and Tuareg were oppressed anew by new rulers, with no difference between them and the colonizers. Thus, the Arabs and Tuareg found themselves moving from one colonization to another, from one oppression to another with no difference between the white Christian Frenchmen and the Black Muslim Africans." Qashat's opposition between the nomadic groups of the Sahara and Keita's collaborationist government takes on a racial tinge, with the bounds of Saharan Arab identity closed to the Black politicians who refuse to recognize Tuareg sovereignty. Yet, he is not so much insisting on the racial whiteness of Tuaregs and Arabs as he is condemning the association between certain African leaders and continuing colonial domination. After cursing French colonization for "imposing ignorance and poverty on the Arabs and the Tuareg" and bringing the region to this wretched state of affairs, he then invites Tuaregs of the Sahara to "return to their Libyan nation and live with their Libyan brothers." The Libyan Arab Republic, he writes, "is today the only guarantee and the only refuge for the inhabitants of the Sahara." He offers Arab nationalism under Libyan leadership as the last remaining solution for the "drought, injustice, and racism of the Blacks [who have] oppressed the Tuareg and stolen their resources" (Qashat, 1989b, p. 263-68). *The Tuareg* reflects how postcolonial political conflicts tended to reify racial boundaries. Despite the flexibility of Qashat's Saharan Arab nationalism, it could also be used to exclude those groups deemed insufficiently committed to anticolonial struggle.

Conclusion: Qashat's Saharan Arab Nationalism in the 21st Century

In a 2014 article on Omani communities in the Indian ocean, Mandana Limbert argued that Arab identity is best understood via studies of the Arab World's periphery. "Through attention to the Middle East's margins," she writes, "we might better understand the various meanings of, and shifts in, notions of Arabness" over time (Limbert, 2014, p. 590). In the Maghreb, cultural production and political ideology has increasingly emphasized the region's multicultural Arab, African, and Amazigh past. Studies like Jeffrey Byrne's *Mecca of Revolution* and Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik's *Maghreb Noir*, have pointed our attention to the importance of North Africa in Pan Arab, Pan African, and Global Left artistic, intellectual, and militant networks in the postcolo

period (Tolan-Szkilnik, 2023; Byrne, 2016). Governments have also realized the importance of the multicultural Maghreb, with states like Morocco beginning to utilize folkloric framings of Amazigh and African heritage as "sources of soft power" in a bid for regional prominence (Aidi, 2020, p. 66).

This paper has answered Limbert's call for expanded understandings of Arab identity by attending seriously to the revolutionary ideology of Qaddafi's Libya as articulated by Muhammad Qashat. I follow Katlyn Quenzer's analysis of the "anti-colonial, anti-imperial nature of Gaddafi's political ideas," which treats the often-vilified ruler as a strategic international actor rather than simply an irrational sponsor of terrorism (Quenzer, 2023). In his ties to regional armed groups and his promotion of nationalist publications through the Center for Saharan Studies, Qashat played a key role in the Libyan state's attempt to claim the leadership of revolutionary Pan Arabism in the Sahara. This project involved the development of a Saharan Arab nationalism which tightly linked desert lifestyles, Arab culture, and revolutionary struggle as core components of a shared identity which united people from the Western Sahara to the Tibesti Mountains. Qashat's conception of Arab identity was flexible and capacious, allowing for the inclusion of ethnic groups like the Tuareg in a shared political community. Yet it also struggled to reconcile the ideal of unity with the reality of political conflict in the era of decolonization, as his racialized description of Malians during the Kidal Revolt reveals. Nonetheless, Qashat's ideas represented a significant challenge to the international political order; they serve as a reminder of a past, however distant, in which it was possible to imagine people from across the region united in revolutionary struggle by a shared love for their desert homeland.

In some ways, the vision of unity in global revolution died with the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011. Across North Africa, Arab nationalism has come under increasing critique by indigenous activists using the language of cultural autonomy and national sovereignty. This includes in Libya itself, where Berber, Tuareg, and Tubu activists have demanded linguistic and cultural rights long denied them by the Qaddafi state (Kohl, 2010). This new generation of thinkers and politicians would likely object to Qashat's assertion that the Tuareg were merely a branch in the family tree of the Arab *umma*. The new faces of Tuareg nationalism are the guitar musicians

bands like Tinariwen, and they embrace distinctly indigenous cultural markers, like the Azawad flag and the Tifinagh alphabet, that refute Arab identity entirely (Joffe, 2014). But this does not mean that Qashat has been entirely forgotten. His ideas find echoes in the work of writers like Ibrahim al-Koni, an author born to a Tuareg family in Ghadames who has achieved significant fame for his Arabic language novels. In works like *Bleeding of the Stone* and *Gold Dust*, he imbues the desert with magical realist elements to explore the desires of the region's inhabitants for freedom and emancipation (Saker, 2024).

Qashat himself survived the Libyan revolution and continues to publish regularly on topics related to Saharan history, folklore, and poetry. He posts poetry on an almost daily basis to a Facebook account that claims his published works include 111 books in total. The tone of his work has taken a more melancholic tone since his revolutionary heyday, while retaining much of the original combativeness which made *Jihad of the Libyans* and *The Tuareg* appealing to Arabic readers. He continues to denounce Western intervention and "NATO's wrecking of Libya" in poems like "From Tripoli to Damascus" (Qashat, 2025). Nearly fifty years later, Qashat continues to use Saharan Arab nationalism to assail colonial legacies in the region.

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Nubian, Communist, Writer: The Revolutionary Voice of Mohamed Khalil Qasim

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The life story of Mohamed Khalil Qassem highlights the social and political challenges that Egypt faced prior to the 1952 Revolution. Qassem's life bears testimony to the marginalization experienced by Nubia during that era. Nubia suffered from social and political exclusion as the British-backed Egyptian monarchy focused on developing the urban areas in the north of the country. Under the monarchical system, Nubia, with its rich cultural history and unique identity, found itself marginalized from Egypt's political sphere, enduring abject poverty, with Nubians treated as second-class citizens.

Mohamed Khalil Qassem, through his political and literary work, would present a different Nubian identity. He tried to marry the preservation of Nubian cultural identity with active engagement in the Egyptian revolutionary liberation project. His adherence to the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (referred to as "Haddato") was a response to the conditions faced by the Nubian community, as he recognized the importance of transcending regional identity to achieve the goal of building a revolutionary state. As a Marxist, Qassem focused on social justice and economic equality as fundamental components of his revolutionary project. This vision was not limited to political change; it also aimed to establish a socio-economic system which upheld the basic rights of every individual, whether they be from the north or the south, the city or the countryside. It also called for the eradication of class-based exploitation and racial discrimination that Nubians were enduring.

Qassem believed that radical change could only be achieved through a comprehensive revolution that would cover all aspects of life. Through his novel titled *Al-Shamandura* ("The Buoy" in English) and his participation in "Haddato," Qassem gave voice to the concerns of his community, striving to present an accurate portrayal of the lives of Nubians who lived on the margins of Egyptian society. The novel, published in 1968, gives voice to those suffering and

the isolation endured by Nubians under the harsh conditions of poverty and discrimination, particularly after the second elevation and expansion of the Aswan Dam.

Qassem struggled to assert the existence of Nubians in a homeland that did not really seem to recognize them as its own. Qassem was not simply advocating for the rights of Nubians. He envisioned a more just and equitable Egyptian society—one that would be free from classism and racism, and open to cultural and social diversity.

Qatta:

Mohamad Khalil Qassem was born in Qatta, a Nubian village, on July 15, 1922. His father was a farmer, but became a merchant in the wake of the flood provoked by the second elevation of the Aswan dam. The flood came to be viewed as an utter disaster. It had submerged houses and wreaked havoc in the land, leaving behind ruin and destruction. This catastrophe would create much sorrow in the hearts of Nubians. Many would thereafter try to build new lives on the nearby rocky lands and in between the mountainous areas by the Nile River. Able-bodied people would also flee to other areas in search of work, amidst a deep sense of bitterness and alienation, leaving behind only people who, due to some vulnerability or constraint, could not move to other areas. As a child, Qassem would sit above the fountain, his heart heavy, and his eyes stretching far into the horizon, recalling memories of the past, taking stock of the palm trees that had been uprooted and scattered.

As soon as he had learned the alphabet, Qassem started to assist his father in running the family's retail shop. Before long, he was invited to write letters for the families of migrants and to read them letters they had received. Qassem thus became privy to the secrets and the pains of the village-folks. He even came to know about the love and affection that women had for their expatriated spouses, as they pleaded with them to return to the village after a long absence. All of these secrets were committed to his heart. Qassem received his primary education in the village's primary school. He then enrolled in the middle school in Aniba village. After receiving his primary school diploma, Qassem had to move north to enroll in high school, which was based in Aswan. He would forever recall the sense of sadness that imbued his home as he prepared to leave the village.

It was during this period that Qassem's literary talent as a poet started to blossom. His verse was full of images of rebellion and nature, with him dallying on the banks of the Nile. I

was his gift for poetry that got him into the competitive high school. Having obtained his high-school diploma, the next step for Qassem to take was to move to Cairo to attend university, having shown little desire to stay in Aswan.

Cairo:

During his university years, Qassem read books on literature, philosophy and politics. As he would recount, the lectures and the seminars that he attended led him to accidentally join the Muslim Brotherhood, albeit for a short period of time. What really drew his attention were the social and political activities organized by fellow Nubians at the Nubian Club in downtown Cairo and the interesting exchanges with his comrades Zaki Murad and Maher Zaki, at the Club's headquarters on Ibrahim Basha Street (currently, *Al-Jumhūriah*, "Republic," Street.) Nubians hailing from different villages would gather and reminisce about their community life prior to the 1933 floods. It was during this period that Marxist ideas began to penetrate his and his comrades' minds as the British occupation was well underway. The masses were in the grips of poverty, ignorance, disease, and exploitation. Anti-colonial sentiment had grown, as after years of British deferment, people came to realize that Egypt would never be liberated through truces, concessions, alliances, or compromises, but rather through armed struggle and revolution.

The lines were drawn between people dedicated to ending colonialism, at any cost, and the Royal Household, parties, and organizations that represented entire classes of influential landlords, who wanted the occupation forces to stay in Egypt. These classes dreaded the people more than they did the colonizers, for they were more closely bound to the occupiers by common interests than they were to the national territory.

Qassem believed that socialism was congruent with the concerns and interests of Nubian people. He also believed that it was comprehensive enough to provide a pathway for millions of miserable, toiling people to confront social injustice. This is why Qassem joined the Democratic Movement for National Liberation ("Haddato") in the early 1940s. Upon entering the movement, Qassem, together with some fellow Nubians, established the Nubian Section of the movement. The activities of the Section commanded the interest and participation of a large proportion of Nubians based in Cairo, though they were scattered among various districts, such as Abdeen, Bulaq Abul-`Ula, and in Misr Al-Qadeemah (the "Ancient Egypt" district). The activities of the Nubian Section consisted in forming associations and clubs with pre-existing Nubian charitie

They would typically organize solidarity campaigns intended to offer assistance and solace to the families of the deceased in the Nubian community.

Between 1945 and 1948, Qassem and his comrades tried to revitalize these Nubian charities by including educational, cultural, and sporting activities. The Nubian Section tried to address the adverse working conditions of Nubian workers in Cairo and Alexandria, and the suffering of Nubians living in the areas surrounding Aswan, whose displaced dwellers were given little financial compensation. "The joint struggle of Egypt and Sudan against a common enemy" was the slogan adopted and launched by Haddato, which believed in the unity of the struggle undertaken by the peoples of the Nile Valley to get British military forces to withdraw from Egypt and Sudan and the right of the Sudanese people to self-determination. This slogan was diametrically opposed to the motto of the liberal parties or the representatives of large landowners, "one people, one crown."

Qassem would write articles for *Omdurman*, a magazine published by the Sudanese Section of Haddato, which included the likes of Abdul-Khaliq Mahjoub, Babakr Mohamad Ali Fadl, Al-Junaid Ali Omar, and Ahmed Salman. The establishment of this Section was intended to develop Sudanese communist circles until they became sufficiently independent. It eventually adopted the name "the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation" (refered to as "Hasstu"), which thereafter proclaimed itself the Sudanese Communist Party. *Omdurman*, which was edited by Abdou Dahab, was barred from entering Sudan by the British administration and was thereafter banned altogether, along with other newspapers, on July 8, 1946.

Qassem would also establish party cells. He played a pivotal role in organizing the February 9, 1946 mass demonstration, involving thousands of students, following a student conference at Cairo University. Resolutions were then passed demanding the cessation of all negotiations with the British and the immediate evacuation of British forces from Egypt and Sudan. Students marched towards Abdeen Palace to present the resolutions to King Farouk. As the demonstration was crossing Abbass Bridge, the army and the bridge company opened the bascule bridge and attacked the demonstrators. Many students fell into the Nile and scores were injured. This event sparked massive popular anger in various cities across Egypt and led to more intense demonstrations in the ensuing days, spanning from February 10 to March 4, 1946. During February, the student movement took root and assumed a new class-conscious dimension, the clearest expression of which was the establishment of the National Workers' and Students

Committee on February 18 and 19, 1946. The Committee – which brought together Wafd party members, Marxists, workers, and unionists - called for a general strike, dubbed "Evacuation Day" to be held on February 21, 1946. On that day, a massive crowd of about 100,000 people gathered, including 15,000 workers from Shubra Al-Kheima alone (with Shubra Al-Kheima textile workers being prominent in this movement). British occupation forces clashed with the protestors, killing 23 demonstrators, and wounding 121. The following day, the National Students' and Workers' Committee called for a second general strike on March 4, 1946 known as "Martyrs' Day."

The following day, Ismail Sidqi's government arrested hundreds of communist students, writers, journalists, members of the National Committee, as well as labor union activists. Newspapers, such as *Al-Fajr Al-Jadid* [New Dawn], *Oumdurman, Al-Wafd Al-Masri*, and *Al-Dameer* [Conscience], were shut down. Qassem was sentenced to a five-year term to be served at Al-Hadra prison in the Alexandria Governorate—the very prison which witnessed the death of Anton Maroun, one of the founders of the Egyptian Marxist movement, in 1924.
Qassem was released from prison in 1953. This novelist-activist lived during a period marked by waves of national liberation movements across Africa and the Arab world. By virtue of his Nubian origin—a region straddling the border between Egypt and the Sudan and deeply embedded in the African context—he was acutely aware of the artificiality of colonial borders. He believed the struggle against European colonialism could unite peoples of both regions. His writings contributed to the discourse of national liberation, reflecting his vision of the commonalities between Arabs and Africans in their common fight against colonialism. Unlike Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan-Omani historian, Mohamed Khalil Qassem did not explicitly address the fusion of African and Arab identities. As a Nubian, he grew up in a society with a strong African identity, yet one that was deeply engaged with Arab culture. His life and work nevertheless embodied the encounter between Arab and African politics and nationalism.

The 1952 Revolution:

Qassem's support for the 1952 revolution and the Free Officers' Movement emanated from a long history of militancy. From the outset, Qassem's position was supportive of the national bourgeois revolution. But, he disagreed a great deal with the Free Officers' regime and with Gamal Abdel Nasser, criticizing their anti-communist tendencies and their heavy-hande

methods. He was also at variance with them concerning the concept of democracy and their hostility to mass movements, along with their political and intellectual parties. He likewise disapproved of them when they cracked down on workers and executed two activists from Kafr Al-Dawar.

Qasem was arrested again in 1954 and given a ten-year sentence to be served at a military prison, following the so-called 64 Case. From the military prison, he was transferred to Mahariq prison at Wahat Al-Kharga (or, Al-Kharga Oasis), where he mobilized the members of the Haddato organization in 1959. By the end of 1962, all communist currents, together with their advocates and sympathizers, had gathered within the Wahat prison—an establishment from which Mohamed Khalil Qassem was not released until 1964. That year also coincided with the completion of his one and only novel, *Al-Shamandurah* [The Buoy].

The Novel and the Detention Center:

Qassem wrote prolifically during his detention. He translated the writings of Polish-American political scientist and policymaker Zbigniew Brzezinski. He wrote poems that were published in an anthology titled *Qassāid Masriah* [Egyptian Poems], together with Zaki Murad, Kamal Abdelhalim, Mahmud Tawfiq, and Palestinian poet, Moein Bseissou. He published a second anthology, titled *Sirb Al-Balashun* [A Flock of Herons], along with a group of Nubian poets (namely, Mohamed Shindy, Zaki Murad, Abdedaim Taha, and Ibrahim Shaaraoui). Qassem deemed prison to be a venue where he could teach people and learn from them. He taught illiterate jailers to read. Word quickly spread to other detention centers and soon jailers asked to be transferred to Al-Wāha detention center, where Qassem and Communist inmates offered literacy classes. Qassem served as the headmaster of this school and he supervised the education process ably until his jailers came to call him the Honorable Headmaster. Together with his comrades, he likewise set up a stage, where he presented a number of plays.

While in detention, Qassem also completed his most important literary work, the novel *Al-Shamandurah* [The Buoy], which had been germinating for a long time. Between 1946 and 1961, Qassem had stayed up long nights for months, maybe years, by candlelight, writing on small Bafra sheets, a cigarette wrapping paper. The Haddato Central Command provided Qassem with all the means necessary to complete the writing of *Al-Shamandurah,* relieving him of all

party responsibilities, allocating a single room to him to write his novel, and providing him with tea and cigarettes.

Qassem endured all of this because he wanted to immortalize the lives of his people in the first novel ever written about Nubians in history. Although the novel centers on the predicament of one Nubian village, Qatta, it presents a comprehensive picture of Nubian life and the suffering endured by various Nubian villages. *Al-Shamandurah* revealed the world of a Nubian village, its struggle with nature, injustice, oppression, and the flood. Qassem arranged the events in an easy and simple style that was nonetheless poetic. The descriptions are enlivened through dialogue between the protagonists.

With his political awareness and revolutionary thought, Qassem was able to connect the local struggles of the Egyptian countryside and Nubian villages, on the one hand, and the macro-level battles against colonial oppression and tyranny, on the other hand. The flood itself came to be viewed as a social catastrophe created by the ruling class. Tragedy is at the center of *Al-Shamandurah.* The novel is the first Nubian literary work to depict the disaster of the flood candidly, and the Nubian community's larger struggle for survival.

The End of the Journey

On June 10, 1968, Qasim passed away after suffering a severe heart attack in his home in Boulaq Ad Dakrour. His funeral was attended by Nubian mourners and ordinary people, alongside intellectuals, writers, and journalists. A touching sight was the presence of his students —those he had taught to read and write in prisons and detention centers—bidding him a final farewell. His funeral procession departed from the Nubian Club in downtown Cairo. Forty days after his passing, a memorial service was held at the Chamber of Commerce in Bab El-Louq, where the renowned writer Youssef El-Sebai delivered a eulogy in his honor. After Qasim's departure, death swiftly claimed the rest of his family. His elder sister, who had been like a mother to him, soon followed. His younger half-sister, afflicted by uremia, also passed away. His half-brother, devastated by addiction, wandered the streets of Cairo until he his final days.

With the loss of Qasim Hamd Khalil Qasim, the committed communist who loved his homeland and people, and who dedicated his life to the causes he believed in, a beacon of

resilience was extinguished. Honoring his memory must begin with the effort to republish and translate *Al-Shamandoura*, a work that remains unparalleled in the history of Nubia, as well as in Egyptian and African literature.

Translated from the Arabic by Saber El Asri

Amílcar Cabral, Ghassan Kanafani, and the Weapon of Theory

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The Weapon of Theory

Both Amílcar Cabral and Ghassan Kanafani can be said to belong to the second generation of anti-colonial leaders in the wave of independence movements that characterized the second half of the twentieth century. In this essay I show that not only was there a significant overlap between their primary concerns, particularly revolving around the need for a theoretical analysis of the limitations of the leadership of the first wave of independence movements, but also, a convergence with respect to their understanding of the importance of social analysis, and, more specifically, class analysis in the struggle for liberation from colonialism. In fact, one of the things that they wanted to point out when they claimed that the leaders of the first wave of independence movements did not develop an adequate ideology was that these leaders failed to understand the social structure of their own societies; in particular, they failed to understand that liberation from colonialism and neo-colonialism was not in the interests of all members of the colonized societies and that appeals to an amorphous entity called "the people" were likely to backfire. In fact, both Cabral and Kanafani pointed out that there were some classes in their respective societies who benefitted from colonialism and who therefore could not be expected to support the struggle against it.

Cabral argued that the failures and difficulties experienced by some African countries that had already attained independence stemmed, in part, from a lack of clear theoretical orientation: "the ideological deficiency, not to say the total lack of ideology, on the part of the liberation movements – which is basically explained by ignorance of the historical reality which these movements aspire to transform – constitutes one of the greatest weaknesses, if not the greatest weakness, of our struggle against imperialism" (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 122). Of course, it is important to emphasize that Cabral is not making the claim that the ideological deficiency of

first wave of independence movements is the primary or only explanation of the failures and difficulties experienced by African countries like Ghana. Cabral was quite aware that there were global structural elements which contributed to these difficulties and failures. In fact, the leaders of the first wave were subjected to constant aggression from colonialists and neo-colonialists, aggression which both Cabral and Kanafani suffered from, and which eventually led to their assassination in 1973 and 1972, respectively. Nevertheless, Cabral is pointing out that at the ideological-theoretical level these global structural elements and their effects, including the creation of a comprador bourgeoisie, were not adequately grasped by the leadership of the first wave of independence movements and this theoretical failing was a contributing factor in the failures experienced by these movements.

This diagnosis was echoed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) with Kanafani being a key figure in giving shape to the theoretical discourse of the PFLP. In the aftermath of the defeat of 1967, the PFLP held that the petty bourgeoisie led the progressive projects in Egypt and Syria. Kanafani described them as "petty military bourgeois governments" that were afflicted by a theoretical weakness which rendered them incapable of formulating an adequate strategy for waging a successful war for independence (Kanafani 2024 [1970a], p. 198). This was the case because they aimed at waging a conventional war (and a conventional war was the only way that they could keep their political position) without understanding that the vast developmental gap between Israel and its Western backers on the one hand, and Palestinians and their allied Arab states on the other hand, meant that the chances of winning a conventional war were quite slim (PFLP 2017 [1969], 96). Hence, they needed to adopt an alternative strategy: guerilla warfare following the example of Vietnam and, by extension, following the Maoist model (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 99; Kanafani 2024 [1971], p. 171 - 173). This Maoist influence was also reflected in the Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC)'s military strategy (Tomás 2021, p. 110).

Both Cabral and Kanafani were interested in how the social analysis of colonized societies in terms of class stratification can explain the history of liberation struggles. Their successes and failures were to be understood in terms of the class position of the leadership of these movements and the class position of the people who comprised the bulk of the combatants. The fundamental basis for comparison between Kanafani and Cabral is that both of them drew upon historical materialism to frame their analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the

political movements responsible for the first wave of independence. Both of them also drew on historical materialism in order to analyze their own societies and the impact of colonialism on their respective societies with respect to social stratification. In fact, it is entirely plausible to hold that Cabral influenced Kanafani, given their convergence. While Kanafani does not mention Cabral explicitly, the works of Cabral were in circulation in Beirut during the 1960s (Traboulsi 2022, p. 274). Moreover, Cabral's work was known in international circles that Kanafani moved in, such as the Afro-Asian Writers' Association. Thus, we have prima facie grounds that point towards a possible influence of Cabral on Kanafani. Indeed, as I will show below, some of the social analysis presented in the theoretical writings of Kanafani seems to be entirely in accord with the social analysis that Cabral provided in his famous speech in Havana during the first meeting of the Tricontinental in January of 1966.

The Political Content of Afro-Arab Solidarity

Both Cabral and Kanafani were active in a moment of heightened Afro-Arab solidarity. This solidarity would eventually culminate in increased African support for Arab states in their conflict with Israel in the lates 1960s and early 1970s, as well increased Arab support for African liberation struggles during the same period (El Tayyeb 1985). Cabral himself was in favor of both African and tri-continental solidarity movements. However, for Cabral, such movements could not be race based, since in Cabral's view racial uniformity does not guarantee political agreement. Nor was it simply based on the fact that the peoples in question were historically subjected to colonialism. For the bare fact that a given people were subjected to colonialism does not guarantee that they would adopt any particular political response. Furthermore, such a unity could not be based on an assumption of cultural uniformity or kinship. For two reasons: first, even from a purely African perspective there are "various African cultures" (Cabral 1979 [1970], p. 149). Second, there is the fact that even within a given society, culture itself has a "class character" (Cabral 1979 [1970], p. 144).[1] The class nature of culture influenced how culture was used to respond to colonialism. Kanafani held the same view (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 147).

Rather, for Cabral and Kanafani, the unity in question would have to be based on a particular political response to colonialism and neo-colonialism. This is, in fact, what happened historically. For example, in the African continent during the 1960s, the fundamental splits were

[1] This is spelled out in much greater detail in (El Nabolsy and Ltifi 2021).

at the level of political disagreements as opposed to racial difference. The countries in the Casablanca Bloc, which advocated a more forceful and anti-accommodationist approach to imperialism, were Morocco, Egypt, Guinea, Mali, Algeria, and Ghana. While the countries comprising the Monrovia Bloc were Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Thus, the split was not along racial, cultural, or even linguistic lines but rather on explicitly political lines (Sharawy 1984, p. 42).

For Cabral, the only unity worth having is that with other liberation movements which recognize that "so long as imperialism is in existence, an independent African state must be a liberation movement in power or it will not be independent" (Cabral 1979 [1972], p. 116). To be a liberation movement in power is to recognize that it is through acting systematically in the interests of the classes who have the most vital interest in thwarting imperialism, namely the peasantry and the workers, that a liberation movement can maintain its independence. This is what Kanafani meant when he talked about class surrender as the auxiliary to nationalist surrender (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 146). Thus, while Afro-Arab unity could be envisioned, it would have to involve a clear understanding of the basis for political agreement on the resolution of the problem of colonialism and neo-colonialism. This point is important for understanding, for example, the stand of various Arab and African states towards the genocide that is happening in Gaza. From the standpoint of the analysis offered by Cabral and Kanafani, it makes no sense to chide certain Arab states for betraying "their kin." This moralizing language obscures the relationship between the class interests which dominate these states and their position on the Palestine question. Indeed, what would be surprising and in need of explanation is if the ruling classes in certain Arab states supported a struggle against a global order that protects their interests. In fact, if this were to happen, it would show that ethnic-cultural kinship does trump class interests and Cabral and Kanafani would be proven wrong.

Cabral on Palestine

Cabral's own stance on Palestine was well known in the Arab world and it would not be surprising if Kanafani came to know him through his pronouncements on Palestine. Cabral was explicitly in favor of the Palestinian struggle for independence and he contended that the use of some forms of violence to attain that end was justified. As Cabral put it:

> We are with the refugees, the martyrized refugees of Palestine, who have been tricked and driven from their own homeland by the maneuvers of imperialism. We are on the side of the Palestinian refugees and we support wholeheartedly all that the sons of Palestine are doing to liberate their country, and we fully support the Arab and African countries in general in helping the Palestinian people to recover their dignity, their independence and their right to live (Cabral 1969 [1965], 82).

Cabral clearly understood that Israel played a key role in a global imperialist order and that its purpose was to enforce the dictates of the United States of America by functioning as a weapon aimed at any liberatory developments in the Arab region and on the African continent more generally:

> We have as a basic principle the defense of just causes…On this basis we believe that the creation of Israel, carried out by the imperialist states to maintain their domination in the Middle East, was artificial and aimed at the creation of problems in that very important region of the world. This is our position: the Jewish people who follow the Jewish religion have the right to live and have lived very well in different countries of the world. We lament profoundly what the Nazis did to the Jewish people, that Hitler and his lackeys destroyed almost six million during the last World War. But we also understand that this does not give them the right to occupy a part of the Arab nation. We believe that the people of Palestine have a right to their land. We therefore think that all the measures taken by the Arab peoples, by the Arab nation, to recover the Palestinian Arab homeland are justified.
> In this conflict that is endangering world peace we are entirely in favor of and unconditionally support the Arab peoples. We do not wish for war; but we want the Arab peoples to obtain the freedom of the people of Palestine, to free the Arab nation of that element of imperialist disturbance and domination which Israel constitutes (Cabral 1968, 125 quoted from George n.d., 22).

There are several points to note in Cabral's discussion. First, there is the claim that the Palestinian cause should be understood in terms of the right of a colonized people to self-determination, meaning that they have the right to be able to make their own history collectively without the obvious impediment of colonialism. The fact that Israel was established in mid-20th century, when colonialism seemed to be on the way out, did not confuse Cabral, even though it confused many others during this period, as Fayez Sayegh pointed out (Sayegh 1970). Second, there is the claim that all the measures which are taken by the Palestinians and allied peoples to overcome the colonial situation are justified. Although Cabral says that "all measures taken by the Arab people are justified," it is quite implausible that he thinks that every conceivable measure that could be taken by them is justified, more likely he means that the measures which had been taken so far (up to the time of the speech in 1968) are justified including, of course,

violent commando operations carried out by the Palestinian resistance. Cabral himself believed that even in wars of liberation there are norms that ought to be upheld, as evidenced by his treatment of Portuguese prisoners of war in Guinea-Bissau (Cabral 1969 [1968], p. 127 – 130).

Nevertheless, the point remains that, according to Cabral, the use of certain forms of violence to overcome the colonial situation is justified. Cabral does not expand upon this claim, but we can reconstruct his reasoning by paying close attention to the context. First, Cabral is clearly not in favor of suffering and violence in general or of violence for the sake of violence. However, one could argue that in a colonial situation where systematic violence is uninterrupted, it is not infrequently the case that concentrated (even spectacular) violence is necessary in order to overturn the status quo and bring about a less violent mode of socio-political existence. Indeed, this was what the historical experience of Algeria had taught many anti-colonial intellectuals and leaders by the 1960s (Young 2001, p. 293 – 307). Cabral held that it is incoherent to claim that someone has a right to some thing while denying that they have a right to the sole means which would enable them to acquire that thing.[2] Moreover, the justification for violence is not premised on the promise of some future utopia which will come about in the post-colonial situation. Rather the justification is premised on the fact that violence and the threat of violence by the colonized party in a colonial situation can often immediately alleviate systematized colonial violence and dispossession by forcing the colonizer to make concessions.

Furthermore, Cabral and other intellectuals involved in the Tricontinental were aware that while non-violent independence movements were able to achieve gains in certain places (e.g., Ghana and India), the adequacy of non-violence as a means was dependent on the response of the colonizer and the existing legal structures in the colony. For example, the repeated rejection of petitions submitted by the Palestinian elite to the officials of the British Mandate led some elements of the Palestinian leadership to recognize that, in their situation, "without violence, politics was useless" (Hughes 2019, p. 96). Speaking more generally, it is important not to conflate the fact that an occupying or oppressing force chooses to negotiate with the non-violent faction of a resistance force (which also includes violent elements), with the claim that such a non-violent faction would, by itself, have succeeded in bringing the occupying or oppressing force to the negotiating table, had there not been other violent elements or factions struggling to overturn the situation. Moreover, even if there are no violent factions in a given liberation

[2] For an articulation of the stakes involved here and for a defense of this principle, see (Honderich 2007).

movement, it would be naïve to think that the response of colonial authorities in one society does not reflect their awareness of the existence of violent movements for independence elsewhere. For example, the independence of India should be seen not just as the outcome of Gandhi's non-violent movement but also as the product of the pressure exerted by violent disturbances taking place on the sub-continent itself as well as the weakening of the British Empire through World War II and the series of violent uprisings across the British Empire that started with the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 (Losurdo 2015, p. 106 – 107). We cannot simply assume, without a compelling argument, that we can abstract from all of these factors and present Gandhi's non-violent movement as having been sufficient for winning India's independence.

The Prism of Class: Unity and Fragmentation

Both Kanafani and Cabral emphasized the importance of understanding the historical trajectory of resistance against colonialism in terms of class analysis. This is evidenced by Kanafani's study of the Revolt of 1936 and Cabral's analysis of the social structure of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Kanafani made the point that the bulk of the fighters in the uprisings of 1929 and 1933, which preceded the Revolt of 1936, were peasants with smallholdings who often had to sell their land to large Arab landholders in order to buy weapons and ammunition. Kanafani indicates that in some cases the large Arab landholders in turn sold the land to Jewish settlers (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 34). Thus, Kanafani dissects the manner in which certain classes in Palestine had interests which were antagonistic to the interests of the small peasantry and their struggle for liberation from colonialism. Moreover, Kanafani shows how, during the 1936 Revolt, the fact that the traditional Palestinian elite leadership (drawn from large landowners and merchant families with an urban base) was operating from exile in Damascus, meant that "the role of the local leadership whose social origins is to be found in the poor peasantry was greater than in the previous period, and this local leadership was closely connected to the peasantry" (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 92 – 93). This is significant because Kanafani argues that in the "entire history of the Palestinian struggle the popular armed revolution was never closer to success than it was during the months between the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1939" (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 93).[3] This is quite a radical claim; Kanafani is maintaining that it is only when the leadership was drawn from the smallholding

[3] The translation from the original Arabic is made by the author.

peasantry, or their educated children who formed the revolutionary segment of the petty bourgeoisie, that the armed struggle, waged as a Maoist people's war with the aim of encircling urban centers from the countryside, seemed to have a good chance at succeeding.[4]

Kanafani's analysis is remarkable because unlike some of his contemporary (non-Marxist) Arab thinkers he did not fixate on a moralizing analysis (e.g., the Islamist analysis of failure in terms of turning away from God), rather he explained the ability of the local leadership to mobilize the peasantry in terms of their social origins. The revolt failed because the British mounted a tremendously brutal and effective counterinsurgency campaign and because the local leadership of poor peasant origins was unable to free itself entirely from its organizational ties to the leadership in exile constituted by the traditional Palestinian elite. Furthermore, the Arab monarchies systematically undermined the revolt in coordination with the British (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 88), a role that they would continue to play into the crucial decade of the 1960s (Kanafani 2024 [1970c], p. 247 – 259) and up to the present.

For Kanafani, the analysis of the reasons for the successes and failures of the Revolt of 1936 was not purely academic, it provided an insight into the contemporary situation. Thus, in the PFLP's *Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine,* which Kanafani helped draft along with George Habash and Basil al-Kubeisi (Barakat 2024), a prime place was accorded to what were called the forces of "Arab reaction": "in a real liberation battle waged by the masses to destroy imperialist influence in our homeland, Arab reaction cannot but be on the side of its own interests, the continuation of which depends on the persistence of imperialism, and consequently cannot side with the masses" (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 36). Like Cabral, the PFLP was faced with Arab opposition to the idea that a class analysis is suitable for understanding Arab societies. The PFLP, with Kanafani playing a leading intellectual role, responded to such claims by arguing that while it is true that the classical picture of classes in metropolitan societies does not apply to Arab societies, it is nevertheless true that there are obvious class divisions in Arab societies in general and in Palestinian society in particular. This is evidenced by the fact that "the overwhelming majority of combatants are the children of workers and peasants" (PFLP 2017

[4] In fact, it was only during this period that the situation in Palestine approximated the conditions that were modelled in theories of guerilla warfare in the military texts associated with the Chinese and Vietnamese Revolutions, meaning, the numerical preponderance of the colonized and the possibility of encircling urban settlements through control of the countryside. As Kanafani notes, after 1948, these conditions were no longer present, and they could only be replicated by conceiving of the struggle as an Arab-Israeli struggle as opposed to a purely Palestinian-Israeli struggle (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 136). In other words, using the Vietnam analogy, the Hanoi in question wo be Arab and not Palestinian.

[1969], p. 45). These classes, according to the PFLP, "form the majority of the Palestinian people and physically fill all camps, villages and poor urban districts" (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 47). Kanafani himself, in describing the trajectory of the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) from progressive Arab nationalism to the Maoist inflected Marxism-Leninism of the PFLP, notes how experience and historical reflection taught them that "they could not win the war against imperialism unless they relied on certain classes: those classes who fight against imperialism not only for their dignity, but also for their livelihood" (Kanafani 2024 [1972], p. 28). Kanafani's class analysis of the 1936 Revolt was always geared towards making a political point about the present situation. A very similar analysis could be made of the position of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah vis-à-vis the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Indeed, just as the children of the camps carried the weight of Palestinian revolt in the 1930s and 1960s, the children of the camps in Gaza and Jenin continue to do the same today.

Like Kanafani, Cabral claimed that the lack of adequate class analysis explained the setbacks suffered by the first generation of the leaders of independence movements. For example, in Cabral's homage to Kwame Nkrumah he emphasizes Nkrumah's stature as an icon of African independence, but he also asks "what economic and political factors made the success of the betrayal of Ghana possible despite Nkrumah's personality, courage, and positive action" (Cabral 1979 [1972], p. 116). More specifically, Cabral insists that we must ask:

> Just how far would the success of the betrayal of Ghana have been linked or not to the questions of class struggle, contradictions in the social structure, the role of the Party and other institutions, including the armed forces, in the framework of a newly independent state? Just how far, we wonder, would the success of the betrayal of Ghana have been linked or not linked to the question of a correct definition of that historical entity, that craftsman of history, the people, and to their daily action in defense of their own conquests in independence? (Cabral 1979 [1972], 116).

It is clear that Cabral is essentially posing the same question that Kanafani posed with respect to the Revolt of 1936, namely the question of whether, in fact, it makes sense to speak of the people as a whole as involved in the struggle against colonialism and whether all classes in a colonized society have an interest in the termination of the colonial condition. Cabral is possibly alluding to Nkrumah's flirtation with African Socialism as a social and political theory which denied the existence of classes in African societies and the relevance of class analysis for African societies (El Nabolsy 2023). Nkrumah himself after the coup that deposed him denounced African Socialism (Nkrumah 1967). Cabral, like Kanafani, was thus indicating that the lack o

adequate social analysis was an impediment to liberation movements. Moreover, Cabral, like Kanafani, identified the forces of liberation as being comprised of an alliance between the peasantry, the workers, and what Cabral calls the "revolutionary sector" of the petty bourgeoisie, meaning, the progressive intelligentsia such as Cabral himself (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 135). The petty bourgeoisie, for Cabral, refers to engineers, lawyers, doctors, schoolteachers, and the like. Yet, Cabral was also aware that this petty bourgeoisie could turn on the liberatory project. For according to Cabral, state power ultimately rests on the economic power of the ruling class, and the petty-bourgeoisie insofar as it lacks economic power can never become a ruling class (although it can be become the governing class). As Cabral puts it: "history shows that whatever the role (often important) played by individuals coming from the petty bourgeoisie in the process of a revolution, this class has never possessed political power. And it never could, since political power (the State) has its foundations in the economic capacity of the ruling class" (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136). So, if the petty bourgeoisie can lead the anti-colonial revolution, but cannot become the ruling class, what is its fate? To answer this question, we have to first answer the following question: who, in the colonial and neo-colonial situation, has or can have the kind of economic power that is at the foundation of political power? According to Cabral the answer is that economic power is "retained in the hands of two entities: imperialist capital and the native classes of workers [and peasants]" (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136). Consequently, the petty bourgeoisie has no option but to side with one of these two entities. According to Cabral the petty bourgeoisie can either choose to commit "suicide as a class" (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136) by abdicating state power in favor of the peasantry and the workers or it can choose to ally itself with "imperialist capital."

What is especially remarkable is that Cabral thinks that this choice cannot be articulated except in moral terms. As he puts it, "if national liberation is essentially a political question, conditions for its development stamp on it certain characteristics that belong to the sphere of morals" (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136). In one sense, we could say that Cabral recognized that an appeal to self-interest was not enough to ensure that the petty bourgeoisie would not turn into agents of imperialism.[5] Thus, while Cabral was wary of moralistic explanations in general, he does concede that on a fundamental level there is no escaping from key moral questions in the case of the liberation struggle.

[5] Although, of course, the appeal to self-interest is arguably a form of moral discourse as well.

It is quite clear that Cabral was describing the decision that many liberation movements faced in the aftermath of independence. Furthermore, he was describing the situation that the petty bourgeoisie in Palestine faced and continues to face. Kanafani and the PFLP also reflected on the problems that stem from the fact that it is a segment of the petty bourgeoisie which is leading the alliance of workers and peasants against Israel. Indeed, the analysis offered by Kanafani and the PFLP is almost identical to Cabral's analysis which was offered three years earlier in Havana:

> …the reason for the existence of the petit bourgeoisie at the head of the Palestinian national movement is that, during the stages of national liberation, this class is one of the classes of the revolution, in addition to the fact that its numerical size is relatively great and that, by virtue of its class conditions, it possesses knowledge and power. Consequently, in a situation where the conditions of the working class from the viewpoint of political awareness and organization are not developed enough, it is natural that the petit bourgeoisie should be at the head of the alliance of the classes opposing Israel, imperialism and Arab reaction (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 54).

Cabral also indicates that the national movement has to be led, at least initially, by the petty bourgeoisie because it is the only class with an interest in terminating the colonial condition which is able to grasp the nature of the situation by virtue of its "higher standard of living than that of the masses, more frequent humiliation, higher grade of education and political culture" (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 135). For Cabral, the peasantry is the social group that "has the greatest interest in the struggle," but, on its own, it is unable to recognize this fact (Cabral 1969 [1964], p, 60). Kanafani would also register the outsized role played by the intelligentsia in the history of revolts in Palestine before the foundation of the state of Israel in similar terms (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 48). However, as Cabral indicated, and as Kanafani and the PFLP were aware, the petty bourgeoisie is a vacillating ally, hence they warned against deferring to the leadership of this class (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 53 – 55). According to Kanafani the surrender of leadership to this class or to the comprador bourgeoisie would involve the liquidation of the nationalist project in its entirety: "when revolutionary theory confesses that class surrender is the auxiliary of [Arab] nationalist surrender, and that nationalist surrender provides the conditions to impose class surrender, then the organization cannot avoid ascribing priority to its worker and peasant extensions" (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 146).

Cabral and Kanafani's articulation of the choice facing the petty bourgeoisie turned out to be prescient for Palestine. On the one hand, you have members of the petty bourgeoisie such

Kanafani and Habash who can be said to have chosen to commit class suicide. On the other hand, you have other members of the petty bourgeoisie who can be said to have chosen to serve as agents of "imperialist capital" by proxy through working as enforcers for the Israeli occupation as leaders and functionaries in the Palestinian Authority (Ajl 2024). To this extent, Cabral and Kanafani's writings remain important not only for understanding the development of Tricontinental Marxism in the 1960s, but also for understanding our contemporary moment. Afro-Arab solidarity is indeed possible, but it must have a clear political and social basis beyond talk of a common victimization by a racist imperialist international order.

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New Directions in Afro-Arab Studies: A View from the Gulf

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What brings together – and stands between "Afro" and "Arab" – is not a mere hyphen. History, geography, race, religion, trade, slavery, colonialism, as well as academia's area-studies have pulled and pushed the "Afro" and the "Arab" to and from each other. While "Afro" usually denotes roots in the African continent, Arab is associated more or less with a spoken language and a loosely defined geography; yet both intersect with each other beyond those demarcations and are not without their controversies in terms of what they can possibly represent, include and exclude. This hyphenated relationship, despite all controversy, reflects hybridity and interconnectedness. These intersections have been overshadowed by several factors, including the politics of identity that demarcate the "Afro" from the "Arab" and vice versa, in an attempt to make exclusive claim to one but not the other.

Notwithstanding the key role played by national and regional politics in Arab and African countries have played in shaping the relationship between the "Afro" and the "Arab," especially since the era of decolonization and independence, I focus here, not on politics but on academia's role in fostering this divide through the "area-studies" model, leading to the compartmentalization and separation of the Afro and the Arab. I then look at recent academic trends attempting to reconstruct/restore this relationship, aided by new methodologies and sources. I focus on two current initiatives in the Gulf region, where academia and research centers are paving new ways in recognition of this relationship. I bring attention to the mission of The Africa Institute at the Global South University in Sharjah, as well as to the initiatives of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Unit at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, and the History Program at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

Afro-Arab in the Faultlines of Area Studies

Area studies, as they were conceived at Western universities, were conditioned by Cold War competition, and imperial interests in the Global South. The world was divided into "areas" that corresponded to the West's political, economic, and strategic interests in the Global South: hence Middle East Studies, African Studies, South Asian Studies, Latin American Studies, and the like were defined as area studies, but of geopolitical interest. Area studies emerged in Western universities, Anglophone ones more specifically, not only to produce knowledge on those areas but also to support the foreign policies of Western states.[1] The collapse of the Soviet Union and the threat of Communism did not put an end to the area studies model. It remained embedded in the academic structure, tied to government funding, and needed for strategic and political reasons. In the case of Middle East Studies and African Studies - our areas of concern here, and which straddle the "Afro-Arab" - new determinants and urgencies arose, among them "the threat of Islam" and "terrorism", as well as the West's perceived mission to aid the spread of democracy worldwide.[2]

No doubt that area studies as fields of scholarly expertise have produced valuable scholarship, and occasionally that scholarship has challenged official policies and narratives towards areas in the Global South. But this model has its shortcomings, including the perpetuation of intellectual practices that have enshrined epistemological and geographic borders that carved up different areas of the developing world. Scholars have been increasingly aware of the implications the area studies model for knowledge production, and of the need for new methodologies and visions to overcome them. Scholars have attempted to reconfigure the area studies model. For example,

[1] The literature on this topic is extensive. See, for example, in the case of Middle East Studies, Adelson, Roger. "British and U.S. Use and Misuse of the Term 'Middle East.' " In *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*, edited by Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper, 36–55. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Guillemette Crouzet, "Les Britanniques et l'invention du Moyen-Orient: essai sur les géographies plurelles," *Esprit*, no. 424, mai, 2016, 31-46; ; On African Studies, see Paul T. Zeleza, "The Pasts and Futures of African Studies and Area Studies," *Ufahamu*, Vol. 25:2 (1997), 5-41; Pearl T. Robinson, "Area Studies in the Search of Africa," *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, David Szanton, ed. (University of California Press, 2003), 119-183.

[2] Hossein Khosrowjah, "A Brief History of Areas Studies and International Relations," *Arab Studies Quarterly,* 33, no.3/4, 2011, 131-142.

Middle Eastern scholarship has traditionally revolved around the Istanbul-Cairo-Beirut-Baghdad axis, paying occasional lip service to the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, and North Africa. This is not to lessen the importance of these metropoles, but we need to think in terms of multiple centers if we are to write a comprehensive narrative of societies strongly connected with one another. The same critique can be applied to African Studies: scholarly attention is often directed towards sub-Saharan Africa, sidelining North Africa and the Sahara. Only when we acknowledge the parochial nature of area studies can we seek ways to overcome it.

Scholarship on one particular region, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, showcases the limitations of the area studies model. Sitting on the periphery of Middle East Studies, and considered outside of African Studies, the Gulf region was until recently marginalized in the scholarship, and studied without considering its historical and geographical connections.[3] My focus here is largely on the Anglophone scholarship. As for the Arabic scholarship on Afro-Arab relations, I believe it is still fragmented and has not yet formed a scholarly tradition whose trajectory one can follow across the Arab region. However, one does observe monumental efforts such as the edited collection *al-ʿArab wa Ifriqya: buḥūth wa munāqashāt* [Arabs and Africa: Research and Discussions] published in 1987, by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies (Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥda al-ʿArabiyya.)

The Emergence of Afro-Arab Scholarship

The first scholar to address this issue and to reframe our understanding of the importance of the Arabian Peninsula, in African Studies in particular, was Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan scholar of Omani origin. Mazrui's central argument was that Africa's civilization consists of a "triple heritage:" indigenous, Muslim, and colonial European. In 1992, Mazrui coined the term "Afrabia," arguing that Arabia belongs to Africa more than to Asia, underlining the historical relationship and connections between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, including the Gulf.[4]

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[3] *Al-ʿArab wa Ifriqya: buḥūth wa munāqashāt*, (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 1987).

[4] Ali A. Mazrui, "Afrabia: Africa and the Arabs in the New World Order," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 20:3, 1992, 51-62. See also, Hamdi Abdul Rahman, "al-Afroʿ Arabiyya fi al-fikr al-siyāsi wa-l-ijtimaʿi li Ali Mazrui, [Afrabia in the Socio-Political Thought of Ali Mazrui] " in *Afriqya wa al-ʿArab wa-l-Istiʿmār: Dirasat fi Fikr Ali Mazrui* [*Africa, Arabs and Colonialism: Studies in the Thought of Ali Mazruii*] , ed. Muhammad Ashour Mahdi, 65 (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥda al-ʿArabiyya, 2022). Mazrui, as well, was also among the first African

Mazrui urged us to re-imagine that relationship beyond what might be perceived geographical barriers deceivingly isolating Africa from Arabia, adding that the "the Red Sea has no right to divide Africa from Arabia." He urged us to envision the African continent's borders stretching over the Red Sea to include Arabia. "Afrabia,"as he put it, encapsulates the Afro-Arab, in both its historical and present dimensions.

Almost a decade after Mazrui advanced the "Afrabia" thesis, a new generation of scholars, particularly historians, began to challenge, yet again, the boundaries of American area studies model, putting together the Afro-Arab parts. My own academic journey, straddling both Middle Eastern and African Studies, took that path as I was becoming more and more mindful of the shortcomings of the area studies model. Trained in Arab history as an undergraduate student at the American University of Beirut, and in both Middle Eastern and African histories as a graduate student at the University of Alberta in Canada, I saw how such a model was providing us with parochial histories and overlooking larger ones. I was exposed to the history of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf due to my training in African history, and not Arab history, which is still centered on the Mashriq. That exposure came via my work on East Africa. Likewise, my exposure to North Africa was also due to my study of Saharan history. I encountered the Afro-Arab zones of interaction as I was researching the politics of identity of the Omani intellectual elite in the Zanzibar Protectorate, discovering the various connections between East Africa and Oman, and beyond it to the Mashriq and the Maghrib. My doctoral dissertation, then turned into a book that examined the intellectual and political ties between Zanzibar, Oman, Algeria, Egypt, Istanbul, and the Mashriq and the ways those connections shaped the politics of identity of the Omani elite in Zanzibar as a British Protectorate. Out of those connections emerged an Omani intelligentsia strongly tied to the *Nahda*, the Arab cultural movement of the late 19th an early 20th centuries, and to movements of Islamic reform and pan-Arabism. My work analyzed how Zanzibari nationalism that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s was formulated by the Omani intelligentsia tapping these cross-border connectionns.[5] The

scholars to draw the comparison between Israel's occupation of Palestine and Apartheid South Africa. See also Hamdy Hassan, "Rethinking the Idea of Afrabia in Ali Mazrui's Political and Social Thought," in *Critical Perspectives on Culture and Globalization: The Intellectual Legacy of Ali Mazrui,* eds. Kimani Njogu & Seifudein Adem (Nairobi: Twaweza Communications, 2017, 122-139.

[5] Amal N. Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to th Indian Ocean (1880s-1930s)*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

book, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s-1930s)*, was foundational in, and representative of, writing a cross-regional history that incorporates Oman's and Zanzibar's modern history into the larger Arab political and intellectual history. That cross-regional history was an Afro-Arab continuum.

Cross-regional and trans-regional research reveals the importance of the network as a historical methodology, and as an alternative to the traditional model of siloed area studies. Ĭn this usage, the network is an analytical tool used to "trace connections and interactions across areas and disparate spaces," and "establish cross-regional links and chart the movement of ideas and people across both physical and historiographical borders."[6] It consists of interrelated groups with common interests and goals, adhering to the same intellectual lineage and committed to the same causes, with their own system of communication. The growing interest in the field of Indian Ocean Studies and the use of the Indian Ocean littoral as an analytical space stitching together East Africa, South Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula has allowed for the integration of the Arabian Peninsula into the wider region of the Western Indian Ocean, unearthing Afro-Arab dimensions long concealed by the area studies boundaries.

As scholars had started to reconfigure geographic spaces, a few cross-regional research initiatives emerged. The first was by the now defunct *MIT Journal of Middle East Studies*, with a special issue entitled "Frontier Geography and Boundless History: Islam and Arabs in East Africa – A Fusion of Identities, Networks and Encounters." The issue examined the marginality of Arab communities in East Africa, describing how those communities "have fallen in the cracks of both Arab geography and African history." The contributors delineated "new intellectual paradigms that defy existing boudaries of scholarship on Islam and Arabs in that region."[7] About a decade later, the *Journal of Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, published a roundtable on "The Indian Ocean and Other Middle East." The essays, as the editorial explained,

[6] Idem., "Transcending Area Studies: Piecing Together the Cross-Regional Networks of Ibadi Islam," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 23, no. 3: 2014, 582-589.
[7] Ibid., "Introduction," *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies: Crossing Boundaries, New Perspect on the Middle East*, Vol. 5, Fall 2005, 6-7.

> challenge the traditional frame of Middle East specialists that has tended to foreground the history and politics of the core Ottoman provinces of Egypt, Turkey, and Greater Syria at the cost of other Middle Easts. By taking into account the Indian Ocean, this new set of modern histories centered on the Arabian Peninsula manages to escape the narratives of the "oil curse" by grounding the study of the region in a deeper nineteenth- and early twentieth-century past.[8]

Two years later, *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*) featured a roundtable titled "View from the Seas: The Middle East and North Africa Unbounded," re-examining disciplinary boundaries through a focus on oceanic turns within Middle East studies. Noting the historic connections between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, "the essays invite us to recalibrate our analytical vision to see a host of different geographic scales."[9]

In 2020, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) organized a workshop exploring "the origins of the disciplinary divide between the study of Africa and the Middle East," and another in 2021, along with the Program on African Social Research, also "centered around the need for a genuinely transregional scholarship, one which rejects artificial divisions between ostensibly autonomous regions…"[10]

These recent initiatives have created a continuum between Africa, the Indian Ocean with the Middle East, and recognized the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf's historical role as a critical node between the Middle East and the Indian Ocean and thereby centered the Afro-Arab continuum in the scholarship.[11]

The Afro-Arab at Gulf Institutions: A New Paradigm

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[8] Timothy Mitchell and Anupama Rao, "Editor's Note," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Duke University Press, Vol. 34, no. 3, 2014, 435-436.

[9] Akram Khater and Jeffrey Culang, "Editorial," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 48 , Issue 4 , November 2016: 631–633.

[10] Hisham Aidi, Zachary Mampilly, Marc Lynch, "Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach," *Project of Middle East Political Science Studies*, vol. 44 (September 2021), 3.

[11] A number of monographs on topics related to the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean have also contributed to this turn. See, for example, see Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism;* Fahad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) *Nathaniel Mathews, Zanzibar Was a Country: Exile and Citizenship between East Africa and the Gulf* (Oakland: Universoty of California Press, 2024), and Kimberly T. Wortrmann, *Society of the Righteous: Ibadhi Muslim Identity and Transnationalism in Tanzania* (Indiana University Press, 2024).

The writing of Afro-Arab history requires efforts beyond those of individual academics. Fortunately, new institutional initiatives have been launched in the Gulf region (specifically in Sharjah in the Emirates, and in Doha, Qatar.) These projects aim to re-shape the epistemological relationship between "Afro" and "Arab." The Africa Institute in Sharjah, the Unit for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies are generating new scholarship on Afro-Arab relations. The Africa Institute is breaking new ground by introducing African studies as part of the heritage and larger history of the Gulf. In bringing Africa into the academic landscape of the UAE and the Gulf, this initiative is writing the "Afro" into the "Arab." The idea of "Afrabia" is at the heart of the Institute's mission, which understands the Gulf region as "one of mixed populations, in which cultural exchanges manifested in an impressive variety of processes and patterns pertaining to borrowing and assimilation, forced and voluntary migrations, and adaptive strategies, none of which can be fully understood without incorporating Africa into the analysis."[12] The Africa Institute currently offers an MA in Global African Studies, with three tracks: Museum and Critical Heritage Studies, Diplomacy and Africa's International Relations, and Afro-Arab relations. Students in three tracks are required to enroll in immersive language courses in one of four African languages: Arabic, Amharic, Hausa, or Kiswahili, thus focusing on the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and East Africa.

Courses within the track of Afro-Arab relations, "offer a critical assessment of the historical socio-cultural relations between Africa and the Arab world." They address "their diverse historical connections and overlapping histories of solidarity and cooperation, such as the common struggles against colonialism and the emancipatory philosophies and movements that Africa and the Arab world shared." In a critique of area studies, and political science, the program is described as "[d]eparting from the disciplinary methods of political science that divide African studies, which evolved from the legacies of European colonialism, and Middle Eastern studies, which grew out of European Orientalism…" The Institute offers three types of fellowships, including a senior one named in honor of Ali Mazrui. Reflecting the vision of the Indian Ocean as an Afro-Arab space, the Africa Institute publishes an interdisciplinary journal titled *Monsoon: Journal of the Indian Ocean Rim*, which addresses "a glaring gap in the extant

[12] https://www.theafricainstitute.org/mission-vision/, Accessed December 15, 2024.

literature on the Indian Ocean rim, which has sidelined African and Gulf societies falling within the region."

Another initiative that aims at closing the Afro-Arab divide is based in Doha, at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. In 2022, ACRPS established the Unit for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies. While the Unit's official vision does not include a direct reference to Africa or Afro-Arab relations, it identifies research topics to explore, it publishes research papers,, organizes confences, translates into research on the region into Arabic, and collects oral histories pertaining to the region.[13] Complementing the work and the vision of the Unit is the History Program at the Doha Institute, a sister organization for the Arab Center. It has hired two specialists in Gulf history, one of them is a specialist on the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, thus incorporating the Indian Ocean into the larger vision of the Program whose mandate is training in Arab history.

Initiatives held at the Unit and the Doha Institute have brought the Indian Ocean and Africa into conversation with the Arab region. For example, in April 2023, Ulrike Freitag presented in April 2023 on "Jeddah: An Indian Ocean Port, from the 18th to the 20th Century," making the case for Jeddah as an Indian Ocean port and arguing that the "Red Sea is historically part of the Indian Ocean."[14] She demonstrated how the Indian Ocean manifested itself in Jeddah's urban space and cosmopolitan population. In February 2024, the Doha institute and Rubaiyyat Qatar hosted the conference "Water Ways: Epistemologies and Aethetics," largely focused on the Indian Ocean. *Omran*, one of the ACRPS journals, has recently published a special issue based on that conference, featuring articles on Gulf's maritime history and connections to the Indian Ocean.[15] Moreover, in September 2024, the Doha Institute, in collaboration with Virginia Commonwealth University, held a conference on "Materiality of Migration in the Indian Ocean and Global Asia,"

[13] Interest in Afro-Arab relations by the Arab Centre predates the establishment of the Unit. See, for example, the report on the conference "al-ʿArab wa-l-Qarn al-Ifrīqi" jadaliyyat al-Jiwār wa-l-Intima'," 27-29 November, 2011. The conference proceedings were later published in 2013 by the Arab Centre. See, https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/BooksAndJournals/Pages/The_Arabs_and_the_Horn_of_Africa_The_Dialectic_between_Proximity_and_Belonging.aspx, accessed January 31, 2025.

[14] https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Events/lecture-ulrike-freitag-jeddah-an-indian-ocean-port-from-the-18th-to-the-20th-century/Pages/index.aspx, accessed December 16, 2024.

[15] "Water Ways: Critical Studies in the History of the Arabian Gulf and Palestine," Guest Editor: Ismail Nashef, *Omran*, vol. 50, October 2024.

looking at "connectivities, shared affinities, and art practices that link the Arabian Gulf, Asia and Africa."[16]

The Way Forward

The Gulf region is undergoing rapid changes, including an expanding university system that is attracting top academics to its universities, who are in turn producing scholarship on Afro-Arab relations. A new public conversation is emerging on Afro-Arab history, as seen for instance in the establishment of such as Bin Jelmood House in Doha, also locally known as the Slavery Museum. The House "provides space for reflection on the story of slavery and how it has evolved into modern forms of human exploitation..."[17] The presence of Bin Jelmood House is in itself an acknowledgement of one particular layer of Afro-Arab relations, albeit a most controversial one. Equally important is the range of discussions that this museum's presence generates on those relations in the context of the Gulf. All of the initiatives mentioned, whether museums or research and academic institutions, serve to raise awareness of the Afro-Arab continuum in the Gulf, and to write "Afro" into "Arab."

[16] https://www.dohainstitute.edu.qa/en/News-and-Events/Pages/News-Details.aspx?Title=Aconference_on_Materiality_of_Migration, accessed December 15, 2024.
[17] https://msheirebmuseums.com/en/about/bin-jelmood-house/, accessed January 17, 2025.

Black-Arab Encounters in Literature and Film (2021)

An interview with Touria Khannous

Souffles: **What made you write this book?**

Khannous: I wrote this book because I noticed how often conversations about race are avoided —not just in everyday life, but even in academic spaces. Academics rarely discuss race at schools or universities; people in general avoid talking about race whether in public or academic settings. This silence felt like a missed opportunity to understand our shared history and culture. I wanted, through this book, to contribute to the academic discussions on race, which are undeniably awkward and difficult because they often involve unequal relations of power and privilege. I also wanted to address gaps and silences in the Arabic literary canon, given that there are not many studies that focus on race in Arabic literature. I wanted to explore how race has been represented in Arabic literature and film from the pre-Islamic period to today. Surprisingly, this vibrant tradition has often been overlooked, and I wanted to bring it to light. In putting together a Black literary canon, I was fascinated by how much Arab literature and film have engaged with the idea of race, spanning from the Arabian Peninsula before Islam right up to the present day. But what really became obvious to me is how much of this work has been overlooked. I think it is largely because it does not fit neatly into the existing frameworks or categories that academia tends to prioritize. As a result, it has been sidelined or excluded from the broader conversation. It is such a vibrant and meaningful tradition, and it is a real loss that it has not received the recognition it deserves. This is also partly because the Arabic literary tradition has been classified according to genre and other criteria, which has resulted in race politics being obscured or neutralized. I also wanted to show that the history of black Africans in this region is not associated only with race, since the book also highlights relationships of solidarity, kinship, trade as well as intellectual and cultural exchange between black Africans and Arabs, such as in the case of Mali. Ultimately, I hope this book sparks conversations about race that highlight the deep connections between Black Africans and Arabs throughout history.

Souffles: **What particular topics, issues, and literatures does it address?**

Khannous: The book explores how race has been understood and represented in Arab literature and film across different time periods, from pre-Islamic poetry to modern literary texts. For instance, I examine how medieval scholars debated whether traits like skin color were influenced by environment, and how these ideas evolved over time. The book dives into these scholarly debates about race, looking at how ideas about lineage, ancestry, and identity have changed over time. For example, there is this ongoing discussion about whether traits are fixed or if they're influenced by factors like climate, or even how language can be used to trace descent. I explore how some writers focused on geography as a key factor shaping human groups, while others leaned into theories like the racialized Hamitic theory. I also track how these ideas about race evolved over centuries—from the pre-Islamic period all the way to today—and how the vocabularies of race developed in the region. What is really interesting is seeing the range of perspectives from different authors across a range of time periods and locations. It is like a mosaic of thought, showing how diverse and complex the conversations about race have been in this region. The texts I examine really highlight these debates as well as other theoretical questions, and the authors I discuss come from different time periods and experiences, which adds so much depth to the conversation.

Souffles: **How does this work connect to and/or depart from your previous research and writing?**

Khannous: My earlier work focused on African women's literature and film, exploring how women writers and filmmakers address issues like feminism, nationalism, and postcolonial politics. This new book builds on that by examining how Black Africans, including women, are represented in Arab narratives. Both projects are rooted in my interest in the connections between Africa and the African diaspora, and how these relationships are reflected in literature and film. My book, *Generational Shifts in African Women's Literature, Film and Internet Discourses* (2013), delved into some of the big questions that come up in postcolonial novels and films by African women writers and filmmakers from countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. While each of these countries has its own unique trajectory, they also have a lot of common when it comes to their social, cultural, and politica

histories, especially given their shared colonial contexts. I explore how these women writers position themselves within broader conversations about feminism, nationalism, modernity, and global politics—and how they use their work to build platforms for social and political change in their home countries. I highlight how their perspectives and priorities have evolved across different generations. I also dig into the many ways they exercise agency—whether it's through politics, culture, religion, or art—and how they are actively pushing for legal reforms and driving civil society movements. Throughout my scholarly career, I have been deeply interested in the dynamics and reciprocal interactions between Africa and the African diaspora, and this previous work on African women is relevant to my book, *Black-Arab Encounters,* which looks at how Black Africans, including African women, have been represented in Arab narratives.

***Souffles:* Who do you hope will read this book, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?**

Khannous: I hope that my book *Black-Arab Encounters in Literature and Film* will resonate with anyone interested in understanding the complexities of race, whether they are scholars, students, or simply curious readers. The book is not just about Arabic literature—it is about how we think about race, identity, and belonging. It invites readers to compare Arab and Western perspectives on race and to see how these ideas have shaped our world. I hope it encourages readers to question their assumptions about race and to explore the rich, often overlooked, connections between Black Africans and Arabs. Due to its multidisciplinary character, my book is a reference for readers of Arabic literature and Middle Eastern studies. African studies and Black diaspora specialists and those interested in the history of Arabic literature and the Black communities of the Middle East will also be interested in reading the book. As a study of the issue of race, the book will also interest critical race theorists and scholars on race. The book will impact the way readers venture into the Arab world's racial complexities and provide them an opportunity to compare Arabs' conception of race with the Western ideas of race within the framework of various disciplines. This approach will help readers identify connections between different works that might seem unrelated at first glance. It also opens up a way to explore how race adds layers of complexity to how we traditionally understand Arabic literature.

Souffles: **What other projects are you working on right now?**

Khannous: Looking into the future, my next project will explore how race and white supremacy have shaped the Middle East in the postcolonial era. I will examine a range of issues from beauty standards that privilege whiteness to discriminatory practices in hiring and marriage laws. By examining these issues, I hope to challenge the orientalist idea of the Middle East as a static, unchanging region and show how it has been impacted by global racial formations. I will look at the different manifestations of white supremacy in the Middle East, against the backdrop of its history as a place that witnessed slavery as well as experienced colonialism and postcolonialism. White supremacy is manifested in different arenas from the privileging of "whiteness" in beauty standards to the governmental and non-governmental institutions' active promotion of whiteness and bias against blackness in their hiring practices, to discriminatory marriage politics in the region, etc.

Excerpt from *Black-Arab Encounters in Literature and Film* (2021):

Al-Jahiz' theories of blackness

Al-Jahiz's treatise, which touches on slavery, ethnicity, race, religion and racism within the context of ninth century Iraq, is advanced for its time because of the issues with which it engages. The author's defense of blackness signals the necessary and urgent instant of intellectual analysis of the situation of the Zanj and black people in general. It is also a moment during racial tension and slave revolts when blackness must be politically asserted. Al-Jahiz's project is to rescue blackness from racist, colonizing practices. Wresting blackness from its colonizing connotations requires what Stuart Hall (1997) calls "a politic of criticism" (p. 444). This is evident in Al-Jahiz's outright denunciation of racial thinking when he asserts that "Truly God Most High did not make us black out of dislike for His Creation—only the nations have done this to us" (p. 58). It thus becomes possible to approach Al-Jahiz's text as a racial project that—to paraphrase Howard Omi and Michael Winant—explained racial formations in ninth century Iraq (Winant, 1994, p. 56).

Central to Al-Jahiz's racial perceptions are racial cosmology and hierarchies in ninth century Iraq. The question is: to what extent did people in ninth-century Iraq rely on different notions of race, compared to Europeans and Americans, especially given the cultural and ethnic heterogeneity of the region at the time Al-Jahiz wrote his treatise? Arab scholars of different periods and origins emphasized black difference with regards to culture and biology. In the pre-Islamic era, one's biological and genetic heritage defined one's racial and ethnic identity. Al-Jahiz is obviously critical of inherited racial essences, as he points out:

> Blackness and whiteness come from before the creation of nations, before what God imprinted on the Earth and on the water, before the proximity and distance of the sun, and before the strength of its heat and its brightness. It was originally not anything dirty, not something ugly, not a punishment and not a disadvantage. (p. 59)

Here, Al-Jahiz breaks with the idea of "Nasab," or hereditary racial differences, and postulates that there is no obvious explanation for the origin of color differences. He falsifies the Hamitic theory of race, which claims that blackness is the result of Noah's curse, and that there are human races that came from the three sons of Noah. Such speculation on the origin of blackness and whiteness might be a subtle hint at how racial difference was viewed in ninth-century Iraq where belief in the myth of Ham was widespread and might have been used to justify slavery. It is often assumed that all Muslims accept the myth of Ham, while for authors like Al-Jahiz, blackness is not a curse from God as the proponents of the Ham myth proclaim, but a manifestation of nature, for Blacks, like other racial groups, are subject to their natural environment:

> …there are black tribes among the Arabs, such as Banu Sulaym Iban Mansur and all those not of Banu Sulaym who stay in Al-Harra. . . It has been demonstrated that because of the nature of Al-Harra (a volcanic area), its gazelles, cattle, beasts of burden, flies, foxes, sheep, donkeys, horses and birds are all black (p. 59).

Al-Jahiz situates blackness in nature, which is indicative of his racial naturalism. It is obvious that he is drawing on the racial naturalist argument that posits blackness as part of nature to undermine the curse of Ham theory. Al-Jahiz associates blackness with exotic regions such as "al Harra" where heat and climate cause people and other creatures to be black. Not only is Al-Jahiz writing about humans here but also about animals. Al-Jahiz promotes a racial naturalism in his writing by postulating that climate and geography shape the characteristics of whiteness and blackness. Such racial naturalism resonates with tenth-century geographer Muhammad Al-Idrissi (1100-1165) who has noted that the very hot climates of Swahili coast and nearby islands, and even plants and animals were uniformly black.

Arab writer Ibn Al Jawzi (1116 –1201) also posits such racial naturalist discourse in his treatise entitled "Illuminating The Darkness: The Virtues of Blacks and Abysinnians," where he extols the natural virtues of blackness, and associates it with black bodily organs such as the blackness of the eye: "The eye is constructed of ten parts of which there are seven layers and three are wet, and its layers are reminiscent of the peeling of an onion. From them the place of the vision is black (i.e. the pupil), which displays the prestige of the color as it has been selected for this prestigious organ. Furthermore, the eyelashes were made black so as to absorb light" (35). Ibn Al Jawzi also gives examples of other organs of the body that are black such as the liver, the heart and the hair which "if it is dark, it denotes human beauty, and when it becomes white, this beauty abates" (37). He also draws analogies between blackness and different objects in nature such as the black stones of the Kaaba. Drawing on scholar Al Mussanif, Ibn Al Jawzi states that "the stone named *maghnatis* (magnet) is a black stone which has a unique and marvelous characteristic in that it pulls iron towards it without touching it" (47). Ibn Al Jawzi adds that "the stone which---through rubbing it---reveals the inner secret of gold, and the stones which kindle fire are mainly of the Abyssinian colour. From the stones of which their benefits are widespread are the Kohl stones named al-ithmid, and they are extremely black in colour" (47). He argues that black natural products like ebony, musk and other plants are valuable regardless of the climes in which they are found. Ibn Al Jawzi also points to the healing powers of natural herbs such as Black seeds and savin. He describes savin "as the fruit of the mountain Juniper plant, of which the best ones are the black," (44) thus underlining the way blackness manifests in nature in a variety of climates as well as its healing powers.

Both Ibn Jawzi and Al-Jahiz draw on objects in nature and observations about animals to give the reader insights about their view of racial difference. Al-Jahiz's empirical observations about animals in his eight-volume treatise *Kitab Al Hayawan* [The Book of Animals] might shed light on his view of race. In this treatise, Al-Jahiz discusses the natural behavior and breeding practices of three hundred fifty animal species, which happen to display disparate natures and dispositions. To critique racial essentialism, he uses recurring themes of mixture, hybridization and impurity to highlight the genetic diversity of different species of animals. Even though Al-Jahiz and Ibn Al Jawzi associate blackness with the physical, biological world, their notion of biology is different from the modern European biological theory of race, since Al-Jahiz' idea of what constitutes the body is different from the modern understanding of biology. Also, the biolo

theories of race that pre-modern Arab racial naturalists like Al-Jahiz generated to praise blackness are different from the European biological theories of race which divided humans into subspecies, using pseudo-science to classify black people as inferior.

Al-Jahiz's treatise also includes a clearly stated philosophy of climatic determinism, which makes him a forerunner of Ibn Khaldun's geographical theory of race. Lacking any scientific studies for evidence, Al-Jahiz has to rely merely on his own observations of nature. In trying to prove that black skin color is not a flaw but a manifestation of nature, he draws upon the names of animals and plants to indicate the esthetic value of the shades and hues of black. Skin color is a significant part of the author's argument, since he is aware of the cultural associations of the color black with moral evil and physical ugliness. Thus, he draws on positive visual imagery of the color black from the natural world to convince the reader of the natural beauty of blackness:

> They say, '. . . the night is more striking than the day.' They say, 'Black is always more striking.' Indeed, when the Arabs describe their camels they say, 'Red-brown and fast, but Red is plentiful and black is beautiful. And that is only for camels.' They say, 'Blackness in horses is more beautiful and stronger, and the Black cow is better and more beautiful, its skin more valuable, useful and long-lasting. Black donkeys are more valuable, better and stronger. Black sheep give richer milk and more butter, and dark beasts are more fertile than red beasts. And every black hill and stone is harder and dryer in texture, and nothing can overcome the black lion. There is no date sweeter than the black date…and the date palm is stronger than the others if its trunk is black. (p. 45)

In vaunting the natural manifestations of the color black, Al-Jahiz's work in a way resonates with the modern black aesthetics movement and its slogan "Black is beautiful."

Decolonizing the Race Debate about North Africa

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Internal Debates

Are Moroccan racists [“Les marocains sont-ils racistes?]” (*TelQuel*, 2003)? Under this provocative title, the Moroccan monthly magazine *TelQuel* published its special issue on anti-Black racism in February 2003. Considered then part of a flourishing independent press, the magazine echoed sub-Saharan students and merchants in Rabat and their experience with everyday racism twenty years ago. A decade later, in 2012, *TelQuel* shifted its provocative title into a statement: Moroccans are racists [“Les marocains sont racistes”] (*TelQuel*, 2012). To understand this shift, we need to appreciate the changing face of immigration in Morocco as the country became a land of settlement, not only transit, for migrants from the sub-Saharan region. In 2002 the Moroccan government passed a law to prevent immigrants from crossing to Europe following European pressure and funds. Morocco’s hinterland and shores became heavily militarized, and wandering sub-Saharan bodies became more visible, not only in the bordering northern cities (Hannoum, 2020).

In October 2005, the international press reported on a police raid in the northern city of Nador that left one hundred sub-Saharan migrants stranded in the desert where the security forces had dumped them. The tensions around immigration reached a tipping point when a newspaper and a magazine respectively depicted sub-Saharan migrants as “al-Jarad al-Aswad [the Black Locusts]” and “le Peril Noir [the Black Threat]” (AlJazeera, 2005; “Le Peril Noir,” 2015). The headlines spawned an uproar on social media, pushing the state to seize the magazine *Al-Shamal* and summon its director to the prosecutor’s office for hate speech. The public outcry about “le Peril Noir” compelled *Maroc Hebdo*’s chief editor, Mohamed Selhami, to issue a public apology on the Moroccan TV network 2M.

Everyday racism has also been documented by the National Council of Human Rights, the Moroccan Association of Human Rights, and groups for the defense of immigrants' rights, some headed by sub-Saharan immigrants (Alami, 2014; Conseil national des droits de l'homme, 2013). For instance, the Group antiraciste accompaniement et de défense des étrangers et des migrants (GADEM, or Anti- Racist Support and Defense Group for Foreigners and Migrants), engaged in political advocacy while holding the Moroccan government accountable for violations of immigrants' human rights.[1]

Mobilization and Solidarity

Several local initiatives illustrate the growing awareness of anti-Black racism against both sub-Saharan immigrants and Black Moroccans. The vibrancy of these debates stands in sharp contrast with the myth of discovery assumed by Western-based scholars about Moroccan racism. Thus, in 2014 the antidiscrimination group Papers for All col- laborated with GADEM to launch a first-of-its-kind two-month campaign called Ma smitish 'azzi (My name is not *'azzi*) (feminine *'azziyya*), which is a racist slur for Black people (Al Ashraf, n.d.). The campaign began on March 21 on Facebook, as the Moroccan government was launching the first phase of the regularization of twenty-five thousand undocu- mented sub-Saharan immigrants and refugees. Though this move was unique in the North African region, it was not entirely surprising. Domestic and international organizations' reports about Morocco's mistreatment of sub- Saharan immigrants had hurt the country's diplomacy about western Sahara and threatened the state's neoliberal ambitions in Africa, including a bid to return to the African Union (Katya, 2014). Stephane Julinet, a founding member of GADEM, depicted the campaign Ma smitish 'azzi as a horizontal action to support this top-down regularization policy.[2]

Ma smitish 'azzi was the founding moment for the rise of Black Moroccans' identity

[1] See GADEM's website for more on these campaigns: https: //www.gadem -asso.org/en/home /.
[2] The collective of nongovernmental organizations behind the campaign printed the motto on T-shirts, signs, and banners and shared it on social media platforms, all in Arabic and French. A conference and film screenings bolstered this action through personal testimonies, academic debates, and political interventions. See TelQu "Dans l'enfer des subsahariens."

politics. On January 27, 2021, the BBC Arabic channel aired a video clip of another trending campaign, Mashi ‘azziyya, launched on Instagram and TikTok by fashion model Houda Fou- nou (BBC Arabic, n.d.). Her goal was “to break the stereotypes relating to Blackness, in North Africa and the Middle East, and deconstruct white beauty standards.” Founou opened her page to both Moroccan and sub-Saharan migrant men and women who lined up to claim Blackness and denounce prejudice. Houda Founou declared, “Black is Beautiful” and “‘*Aziyya* is racism.”

Her campaign went viral, but despite her bold stand against racism, Founou rejected the argument that racism was institutional or that Blacks experienced discrimination in state institutions or on the job mar- ket. Founou acknowledged that other Black Moroccans rejected her campaign and denied the existence of rac- ism. Another campaign, the “blackmoroccans” Insta- gram account created by Fatima-Zahra Quatabou, ech- oed these conversations, focusing on racism targeting Black Moroccans.[3]

The Myth of Discovery

Oblivious of the vibrant debates about race in the Moroccan public sphere over the past twenty years, a discourse has emerged recently from Western institu- tions and scholars to expose racism in North Africa, with Morocco as a showcase. Morocco’s perceived stability after the Arab uprisings and Western-friendly policies transformed the country into a laboratory for producing expertise on race. This discourse revitalizes the old colo- nial myth of discovery, as some scholars and media pun- dits claim to be uncovering the faces of racism in North Africa that have gone unnoticed by North Africans. Claiming to fill the presumed vacuum in local debates, they publish articles with titles like “‘There Is No Race Here’: On Blackness, Slavery, and Disavowal in North Africa and North African Studies,” “Ending Denial,” and “Between Slavery and Racism in North Africa” (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2023; King, 2015; King, 2021).

[3] See her interview with Nadia El-HAcimi, “Racisme virtuel.”

Black Moroccans have become the popular subjects of simple and unsubstantiated claims about their "otherness" and about the centrality of slavery to their per- sonal histories (Boum, 2021). This perspective is best represented by Stephen King, who published in the *Arab Reform Bulletin*, the *Journal of North African Studies*, *Africa is a Country*, and POMEPS, among other outlets. King's position is exemplified by declarative statements such as "Morocco is a diverse country and a post-slave society, yet diversity, the history of slavery in Morocco, and the racism and discrimination that is generally inherent in post-slave societies are not taught in schools, adequately addressed in law, nor discussed within most non-Black Moroccan families" (King, 2015). While any effort to end the state's "denial" of slavery and its impact on the per- ception of Blackness in Morocco is salutary, we need to be aware of the way outsiders are positioning them- selves as saviors. Slavery does not in any way exhaust Morocco's historical ties with Africa, notably West Africa (Ait Belmadani and Chattou, 2014). These ties were knotted in webs of exchanges between scholars, Sufi masters, students, spouses, trade partners, and more. They were strengthened later by dreams about liberation, Third-Worldism, and Pan-Africanism that gained purchase in all parts of Africa, inspired in the 1950s and 1960s by the various independence movements, the Algerian revolution, and Nasserism (Aidi, 2022). Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik illustrated the multi- faceted ways in which Pan-Africanism foregrounded postindependence state policy in the 1960s and 1970s. North African governments turned south, encouraging cultural, artistic, and political exchanges. Thus, deco- lonial continental thinking circulated by and through Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian cultural platforms during and after the 1960s (Tolan-Szkilnik, 2023). There is much more to the ties between Morocco and the rest of the continent than the history of slavery would contain.

Dismissing these ties, some of these writings recycle unsustainable presumptions of a clear demarcating line between two distinct categories—Blacks and whites—a color line that separates oppressors and oppressed, privileged and underprivileged. While many Western authors and pundits rush to save Black Moroccan from their oppressors, they ignore the long history of mixing and the enmeshment of Moroccan identities in

variations of skin shades, ethnicities, and languages, never mind mentioning the geopolitical conditions and immigration policies enforced by Europe upon Morocco that have trigered the lively internal debates and racial sentiments (Boum, 2021; El Guabli, 2021; Ait Belmadani, 2023).

Most of these writings privilege slavery as a unique explanatory paradigm for understanding racism in Morocco today. These debates gained currency in the United States with the publication of *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*, a book that documents the creation of the Black Army of ‘Abid al-Bukhari in the seventeenth century under the reign of Sultan Moulay Ismail, one of the founders of the current ruling Alawi Dynasty (El Hamel, 2013). While a rigorous review of this work is outside of the scope of this reflection, I want to examine some of its reverberations in the United States and beyond (Aidi, 2023). A central assumption of the book is that today’s racism relates directly to the history of “Arab slavery,” whose foundations are rooted in Islam and legitimated by sharia and Arab thinkers like Ibn Khaldun (Aidi, 2023). *Black Morocco* is taken as a testimony of an insider, authorizing a traveling discourse about the centrality of Arabo- Islamic slavery,[4] and sharia as a legitimating discourse aiming to limit but not abolish it. These arguments became a reference point for proliferating debates in the United States about Moroccan racism, echoed by a few Moroccan scholars back home and in Europe (El-Miri, 2018; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2023; Yassni, 2023).

Black Morocco was critical for bringing slavery into public debate and consciousness. It showed slavery as foundational to the history of one of Morocco’s few Arab dynasties. What it does not mention is that most dynasties were Amazigh, and Blackness was the primary racial and ethnic composition of all these dynasties that originated from the deep south, producing generations of Black sultans, emperors, state officials, religious scholars, and notables (Mamdani, 2018). Stories about slavery have been pervasive in modern Moroccan novels since the 1960s.[5] However, these debates have taken a new form

[4] On this label of Islamic slavery, see Mamdani, “Trans-African Slaveries.”
[5] A case in point is Ghallab’s groundbreaking novel, *We Have Buried the Past (Dafanna al-madi).*

when read through US paradigms and scholarship.

Multiple Contexts for a New Zone of Theory

French research institutions based in North Africa, including the Centre Jacques Berque in Morocco and l'Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain in Tunisia, have also been involved in the dissemination of race knowledge through academic conferences, film festivals, and research programs.[6] They are forging a new "zone of theory" for generating knowledge about race, but one that, ironically, is unauthorized in France (Abu-Lughod, 1989). The discourse of race is now tested in the Maghreb as a laboratory for renewing old realms of expertise about authoritarianism, sexism, sectarianism, fundamentalism, and now racism.

In sharp contrast with this focus on racism in the Maghreb and the discourse emerging from the Anglo-American academy, European academic institutions, notably in France, are still reluctant to endorse race as a paradigm. Any attempt on the part of racialized scholars to address racism in France is dismissed, as El Miri argued, as "a racist endeavor" (El Miri, 2018, p. 107). He shows that racialized researchers are accused of "bringing race back into the scientific realm" as a way of pursuing political goals. Working outside proper academic settings, groups like les Indigènes de la république (the Indigenous of the republic)—a name that constructs today's France as a colonial state—use decolonial epistemologies and praxis to denounce the French state's racist discourses and policies. This network of writers, academics, and activists puts geopolitics in conversation with history, while helpfully contrasting US-centric intersectional analysis with other forms of intersections, including colonialism, capitalism, and Islamophobia (Guénif-Souilimas, 2000; Bouteldja, 2017).

Intersectional analysis made its entry into femi- nist circles in France in the past decade as a method for bringing together questions of class, gender, and sexu- ality. Yet as

[6] See the Facebook page of the Centre Jacques Berque for information on these numerous activities about r https://business.facebook.com/page/277044279014254/search/?q=race%20.

Fatmea Ait Belmadani and Nassima Mou- joud argued, intersectionality has yet to include the experience of the racialized Other of white feminism (Ait belmadani & Moujoud, 2012, p. 13). These questions and others have been on the agenda of les Indigènes de la république, but this group is totally marginalized in mainstream conversations about rac- ism in France. The discourse about racism that is sup- pressed in France is now displaced to North Africa.

There is a decolonial logic that cuts across these local initiatives and critiques. Anthropologist Abdel- lah Hammoudi situated decolonial logic in relation to "double critique" as a method for relating to the post- colonial situation and colonial knowledge.[36] In the case of the discourse on racism, a double critique entails fighting racial prejudice by attending to local initiatives and upholding people's agency while remaining deeply suspicious about the transfer of part of the discourse of violations of human rights to the southern part of the Mediterranean. As Black Moroccan artist Mbarek el-Bouhchichi noted, the transfer of policing south of the Mediterranean is an attempt to "keep its northern shores white."[7] El-Bouhchichi's art is devoted to illus- trating what he calls "ethnic pluralism in Morocco." He does not see Blackness as a limitation but as "a source of inspiration" and African pluralism as identity (Alaoui Soulimani, 2020).

In the United States, the stakes of race are enormous for the scholarship on the Middle East. The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of the police in May 2020 was attributed to a phone call made by an Arab American store owner, and the event risked polarizing Arab Americans and African American communities. As protests rocked cities across the globe, including in the Middle East, a sustained effort by scholars of the Middle East to engage with issues of racism spawned debates on- and offline. Black Iranian, Turkish, and North African men and women importantly vocalized their experiences of racism by focusing on their specific national contexts. Some problems emerged, however, when their voices and racial analyses were appropriated by experts, both

[7] See "The Invisibility of Black Moroccans," interview by Amina Alaoui, January 15, 2020. https: /themetric.org/articles /the-invisibility -of-black -moroccans.

outside and inside, whose claims have different goals and effects.

When Blackness is represented as “the Other” of North Africa, a particular type of racialization is at work. Blackness is minoritized and whiteness becomes the dominant defining feature. There is a context for these discourses that present Black people as a statis- tical minority in Morocco, given the long histories of mixing and sharp colonial policies of minoritizations and racialization of the entire Moroccan population (El Guabli, 2021; Salime 2023). How does the assumption of whiteness as a dominant feature of Morocco reverse the Orientalist depictions of North Africans as (Moorish) Black to produce them now as white oppressors of their Black “outsiders” within?

Decolonial Ethics

Decolonial epistemologies call for our engagement with the colonial to debunk the myth of discovery and to question the power, positionality, and authority of those who write. To decolonize the debate about race and racism in North Africa, we need to be both critical about the violence of racism and attentive to the contexts in which knowledge about it is produced and circulated. Without being apologists for anti-Black racism, we need to reckon with the diversity of experiences and the specificities of histories of mixing in North Africa. We have to consider the current social and political situation of the migrants from the south seeking Europe who are becoming a new moment in this history of mixing. Above all we have to begin by acknowledging local initiatives and debates and learning from them.

It is important to speak to and from North African experiences, debates, and knowledge production, resisting self-authorizing tropes of discovery and rescue from the outside. Can we be cautious about transposing onto North Africa racial binaries and histories of racial segregation in the wake of Atlantic slavery, assuming that whiteness defines North Africa’s racial fabric and deny- ing the region’s roots in Africa? Offering slavery as the singular explanation for racial tensions in the present dismisses the political and historical specificities and geopolitics that gave rise to the internal debates about race and the violence of racism, debates that spoke to specific conditions in the country an

region.

We need to exercise caution when interpreting the complex racial situation in Morocco, so as not to impose traveling theories or conceptual paradigms derived from different histories of racialization, especially different from the United States or Europe. Not only might they distort North African histories and social realities, they could also be politically consequential because of the geopolitical stakes, whether playing into hegemonic forms of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism or producing dangerous consequences for migrants in precarious situations whose bare life circumstances (and the reasons for them) could get swept aside when lumped together in discussions about anti-Black racism of other sorts.

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Neither African, nor Arab, or Half-African, Half-Arab?: On the Fluid Identity of the Gnawa

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Independent Researcher

An unexpected personal experience allowed me to briefly encounter the "spirits," prompting me to seek them out among the Gnawa.[1] Instead of trying to understand the invisible—an experience that is lived rather than explained—I adopted an inductive, intuitive, and iterative approach that immersed me in the Gnawa's tactics for navigating the cultural, economic, and political challenges they face daily. This fieldwork approach is paired with a critical stance in writing, shaped by the paradoxes that structure the anthropological discipline: immersion and decentering, humility and detachment, engagement and neutrality (Gani and Khan 2024; Russel Y Rodríguez 1998). Rather than elaborating on these paradoxes here, I aim to highlight the dissonance between Gnawa epistemology and that of the discipline.

During my immersion, I observed that the dominant logic within Gnawa practices is cyclical rather than linear. This cyclicality makes it challenging to organize the Gnawa's experiences into titles, subtitles, or analytical categories. The complexity of my interlocutors' identities and the political dynamics that shape them often eludes attempts at classification. Their daily lives are suffused with elements that are unintelligible, unspoken, invisible, intimate, and indescribable. For the Gnawa I encountered, *lHal* (possession)[2] can only be grasped through lived experience: “Possession cannot be explained, it cannot be spoken of. It is lived.” This primacy of direct experience over discourse is echoed in other statements, such as: “If the spirits

1 This article is based on my master's thesis in anthropology at UC Louvain, titled *"Grooving with the Global Flow: An Ethnography of Contemporary Gnawa Practices in Morocco"* (Faidi 2023). It aligns with an anthropology that takes the "invisible" and the phenomena associated with it seriously, without disqualifying them through the use of dominant discourses (religious, scientific, etc.) or Western categories (beliefs, superstitions, etc.). This approach emphasizes lived experience, sensory encounters, and affect (Favret-Saada 1977; Laplantine 2005; Vuillemenot 2018). I also explored the local reappropriations of so-called Western categories and their uses within discourse.

2 Due to space constraints, I translate lHal here as a state of possession by spirits. Elsewhere, I provide a critique of this category ("possession") and offer a situated definition of lHal, based on the contexts in which the term appears and its various uses.

don’t want you to know, you won’t know.” Or, “you have to travel, to see with your own eyes. When you see, you won’t need an explanation; everything will be there, right in front of you.”

This epistemology values *ljawla* (itinerancy) and long durations. It fosters an intimate connection between knowledge and the invisible, conditioning access to the latter on my intention (*niya*) and faith: “Show faith and entrust yourself to God.” Knowledge, therefore, is contingent, non-universal, and relies as much on the researcher’s inner disposition as on relational dynamics. In this regard, I was told: “I have received many researchers from all backgrounds; many understand very little about the Gnawa.” This epistemology embraces mystery as an essential aspect of reality. Some things will remain inaccessible, beyond human comprehension: “Glory to God, these things are mysterious [*Soubhana lah, dakchi f chkel*.]”

Thus, when I reduce the words of a *Mqedma* or a *Maalem*[3] to data for scientific analysis or interpretation, I unintentionally place scientific discourse above the knowledge of my interlocutors. Like an object displayed in a museum, the words entrusted to me are stripped of their essence and transformed into “legitimizing discourse,” “ritualized speech,” “performative act,” or another relevant analytical category. This practice affirms the authority of the researcher and legitimizes them in the eyes of their peers. Although justified by “scientific rigor,” it amounts to a form of extractivism: under the guise of scientificity, it perpetuates an epistemic hierarchy at the expense of local voices (Abu-Lughod 1991).

I write from these paradoxes, which shape my positionality as well as the identities of my interlocutors and myself. I invite a willingness to embrace these identity paradoxes and the tensions between co-optation and opposition that define our academic experiences as *"halfies"* (Abu-Lughod 1991) and *"border-crossers"* (Luste Boulbina 2024). These positions offer opportunities to explore the interstices and hybridities as spaces of creativity and reinvention. I propose following this itinerancy—not in pursuit of truth or falsehood, reality or imagination, but to come closer to the daily concerns of those involved, the reasons behind contradictions, and the economic and political stakes that shape their discourses, practices, and ways of being in the world.

3 *Mqedma* can be translated as a ritual officiant; in certain contexts, the term is rendered as "healer" or "priestess." *Maalem* literally refers to the "master."

Attempts to Write Orality كناوا بحر

The Mystery of Origins:

"The world of the Gnawa is an infinite ocean," I was often told. Every time I mentioned my research topic, discouraging comments flew in: "You will never fully understand it," "Even the Gnawa disagree on who they are," "They'll drive you crazy," "Most of them don't know the history, they'll tell you imaginary stories," "You shouldn't believe everything they say." Despite these remarks, since everything is given, I took note of them, even though I had the feeling of facing a terrain that did not "magically" open up (Geertz 1973).

Over the days, I gathered multiple versions of "the history of the Gnawa," often labeled as the "true" history. The longest version was shared with me by Maalem Najib Soudani, whose last name already reveals his origins. I went to meet him in his workshop. He recounts:

> The Gnawa are slaves from Sudan, Mali, and Guinea. When they lived there, the rich captured the poor to serve them and work in their fields. At the end of the day, these slaves would gather and sing about their suffering. Then, at some point in history, they no longer stayed with the local chiefs. They were shipped to the United States, Morocco, etc. They say that the rich threw beans into the fields at night, and the slaves, starving, would come out to eat them. That's how they were captured. They were put in flour sacks that were sewn shut. They were shipped off in boats. The slaves arrived in Morocco through the port of Essaouira. Others also arrived with the caravan trade, and their currency was cowrie shells. They came from different tribes and spoke different languages. To recognize one another and distinguish themselves from others, they set up a color system. One tribe wore white, another wore red, and you could tell from afar who was arriving. This is where the colors of the spirits come from. They gathered to talk about exile, slavery, and the violence they endured. Even though they spoke different languages, their suffering was the same. Little by little, they created the Gnawi language, which then blended with Amazigh and Arabic. After the abolition of slavery, whites and blacks married and mixed. That's how they incorporated the saints and spirits, already present in Morocco, into their stories of suffering. By the way, the word "Gnawa" comes from the Amazigh: *Gn-awa*, meaning "go to sleep," which would be said to the slaves who sing through the night. Today, it has become primarily a music that brings forth the baraka of the saints and invokes the spirits. In the meantime, there has been mixing. Each of the spirits and saints invoked in the Gnawa repertoire has a particular origin. Lalla Mira comes from Turkey, Sidi Moussa from Doukkala, Sidi Jilali is a saint buried in Baghdad, Sidna Bilal is the muezzin of the Prophet buried in Ethiopia (Soudani, September 2022).

By invoking a memory of origins, Maalem Soudani traces some trajectories of slaves who, upon arriving in Morocco, unite through their condition and differentiate themselves through a system of colors. They are perceived by locals as a homogeneous group (black slaves), within which multiple ethnicities are distinguished. For other Maalems, the word *Gnawa* comes

Amazigh, meaning "the mute," and was used by locals to describe slaves who spoke among themselves. After an etymological and linguistic analysis, historian Chouki El Hamel (2008) proposes that "Gnawa" is the term used by "North Africans" to refer to blacks from West Africa. It would thus be the creation by the "Maghrebis" of a "fictional ethnic category" that brings together blacks of various origins (El Hamel 2008).

Other versions and additional details were shared with me by young Gnawa. Sami is convinced that it's impossible to pinpoint when it began and how it evolved: "There are song lyrics that were created over there and brought here. There are tunes still played there (where?) with similar instruments. Originally, these were songs from the cotton fields or railway work sites, reflecting the daily lives of blacks like the blues. Then, once here, they began talking about their ancestors and started giving value to the locals, including them in their songs. That's how the saints and the geniuses got mixed in." Indeed, like Sami, historians point out the scarcity of written sources and the difficulty of defining the period when slaves arrived in Morocco as one single moment, as well as the places they came from, or precisely the period when the Gnawa community emerged in Morocco (El Hamel 2013).

A different perspective was offered to me by Samir, a cultural mediator, and Hussein, a Guembri[4] maker. Samir warned me:

> You'd better be careful not to use the expressions the French left us. Even the Gnawa blindly repeat them. They don't know. That's what oral tradition is... Actually, this isn't the music of descendants of slaves. It's local Moroccan music with influences from black Africa. Once slavery was abolished, the slaves took refuge in the zaouias, pre-existing religious confraternities in Morocco. So, their music became blended with the saints and geniuses of the Hmadcha, Jilala, Tijani, Issawa, etc. That's why they're also white and not just black.

Samir warns me of the risk of falling into a Western reading that would separate, or even oppose, the locals (dominant Arabs and Amazighs) from the descendants of slaves (blacks, the dominated), without considering the diversity of the Gnawa (who are also white, he points out) and that of the locals themselves. In this, Samir aligns with the argument of Hisham Aidi (2023) in his critical article on the book *Black Morocco* (El Hamel, 2013). Indeed, he criticizes historian El Hamel for solidifying the categories of Arabs, Berbers, and Blacks in a context where intermixing makes it impossible to trace the "ethnic" origins of each group. Taking into

4 The guembri (also called hajhouj or sintir) is the main instrument of the Gnawa. It is a wooden and camel-skin instrument with strings made from goat intestines or plastic strings.

account the current context of increased commercialization and international presence of the Gnawa, the author reminds us that only a few Maalems are black today, and that there is no particular "ethnic solidarity" in this so-called "diaspora" or "racialized minority" (Aidi 2023).

Hussein, whom I meet later in his workshop, shares Samir's viewpoint: "They weren't all slaves. Many came with the caravans and with Al-Bukhari's army. And then, the Gnawa became white, they are no longer black [*Gnawa wlaw bidin mabqawch kehlin*.]" Cynthia Becker (2011) asserts that the complexity of defining this community lies in its ability to adapt, borrow, and negotiate with others at the levels of aesthetics and practices. This story of cultural mixing shows that these hunters, Sufis, and soldiers have assembled "a patchwork of aesthetic styles and symbols that is intrinsically fluid and changing" (Becker 2011).

At the crossroads of "Afro-Arab" influences?

It is clear that it is difficult (and perhaps inappropriate for the ethnographer) to trace these processes of blending between representations and practices stemming from sub-Saharan African cultures and the pre-existing local brotherhoods' tradition before slavery. I note borrowings and overlapping figures that allow for analogies with other African possession cults or Afro-descendant traditions, as well as with Sufi practices in other contexts. I also observe analogies made by my interlocutors with the bori of the Hausa, Brazilian candomblé, Cuban santería, and Tunisian stambeli. These comparisons justify collaborations and fusions between musical groups from these different regions of the world.[5] These multiple versions reveal that the line between what was brought by the slaves and what was already present in Moroccan society, between what is considered Muslim and what is not, is porous, shifting, and permeable.

It is worth noting that other forms of "ritual music" rooted in traditions of brotherhoods, such as Aissawa (Nabti 2006; 2010) and Hmadcha (Maréchal & Dassetto 2014), have always been instrumentalized by national politics, depending on historical periods (Aidi 2014). These

5 The collaboration I have most observed in my fieldwork is that between the guembri and the kora, notably with the Kalimba Project, which brings together Khalil Mounji and Bemba Diabate under the banner of "African Unity," as well as the group of Julian Belbachir and Abdel Ben Addi. Some of my interlocutors have also participated in festivals in Senegal, Ethiopia, and other African countries. It is worth noting that these collaborations are seen by my interlocutors as work opportunities, on par with those in Europe or elsewhere. In some cases, opportunities in Europe are considered more appealing given the migratory aspirations of young Swiris.

traditions have also undergone transformations due to their entry into the market logic and within the framework of "World Sufism" (El Asri & Vuillemenot 2010), generating various forms of adaptation positioned between a perceived "authenticity" and the demands of globalization (Appadurai 2005). While they share this instrumentalization linked to religion (the political promotion of a "moderate Islam"), the Gnawa distinguish themselves by an identity component that plays a central role in their adaptation. In other words, beyond adapting to normative religious discourses, they also adapt to political discourses on national identity, which strives to be diverse and inclusive, as well as to academic discourses on their history and the racial question. This identity component, supposedly linked to the history of slavery and to the diasporic experience said to resemble that of African-Americans, reinforces their potential for commodification and international appeal (Kapchan 2007). This is why "Aissawa Fusion" or "Hmadcha Fusion" forms are not as widely known, and there is no festival as prominent as the Gnawa festival dedicated to the music of these brotherhoods. In fact, these have only recently been included in the official programming of the Essaouira Gnawa Festival.

The stories behind the Gnawa instruments best illustrate the relationship to slavery, which is closely tied to the sacred. Said, a guembri maker, places this instrument at the heart of Gnawa cosmology: "This music densely concentrates the history of a people and their suffering. The guembri is the drop of blood that has been spilled. It is from this that it draws its spiritual dimension." It is with equal poetry that Said describes Gnawa music to me. For him, these musical forms exist everywhere (he mentions Brazil, China, the United States, but especially on the African continent) because "this story of suffering speaks to everyone." However, he insists, like most of my interlocutors, on the symbolic importance of the Guembri. Hana explains that the Guembri refers to the shape of the boat, and the qraqeb mimic the sound of iron chains. "The music comes from the sounds generated by the movement of paddling chained hands and that of the waves crashing against the boat." Maalem Najib Soudani says in this regard:

> The guembri is the boat. This instrument is sacred. In the past, it was forbidden to take it outside the house. It was kept, along with other instruments (qraqeb and tbel), as well as Gnawa clothing, cowrie shells, and colorful fabrics, in a sacred room called *bit al jwad*, the chamber of the genies. You could only enter this room after performing ablutions and prayers. Today, it has lost this sacred value as it increasingly appears in profane spaces.

Considered the junction of three souls—those of the camel, the goat, and the tree from which its components come— as well as the place of residence or passage for the genies it summons, the guembri is animated, alive. Fascinating with its deep musical notes and its pote

intentionality, the guembri is not just an object. The ways of using and interacting with it are codified, and the meanings attached to it are manifold. Becker (2020, p.187) highlights how inseparable the identity of the Gnawa group is from the guembri. She traces the evolution of perceptions of this instrument from explicit stigmatization to its establishment as a symbol of tolerance and diversity (Becker 2020, 188-192).

Fluid Identities:

Beyond this debate on origins, the categories in question are not mobilized by my interlocutors to define themselves. The Gnawa I met define themselves sometimes as Moroccans practicing Gnawa music, and sometimes as Moroccans possessed. When they mention slavery, it either serves as a legitimizing strategy ("My grandfather was a slave, so I am one of the real Gnawa," "We are the original Gnawa") or as a reference to the past ("Originally, these are stories of the suffering of slaves," "Traditionally, it's the music of descendants of slaves"). Therefore, it seems important to take into account the context in which these discourses about origins are produced. Being flexible, the Gnawa define themselves differently depending on the context and mobilize different normative registers. This leads me to further clarify my positionality: to my interlocutors, I am a young Moroccan Muslim woman. To those in Cynthia Becker's study (2020), she is an American woman interested in the African diaspora. These two positions, both in our ways of interpreting the world around us and in the words addressed to us, and in how our interlocutors perceive us and adapt to what they think are our expectations, significantly influence the production and restitution of our data. "Blackness" has not, in this case, been a recurring theme in the discourses of my interlocutors (although some are the same as those interviewed by Becker). However, power dynamics and discriminatory logics are indeed present.

Furthermore, this uncertainty leads to speculations that seem to characterize what Jack Goody (2010) calls "literate-oral cultures," that is, cultures where the presence of writing, often coupled with a hegemonic religion, influences orality. In these contexts, constant creativity fills in the gaps and challenges the idea of "traditional" societies that are stable and unchanging over time. Goody (2010) illustrates how different versions of a story are created that still claim to be "one," wanting to be perceived as "the same." The researchers themselves, often in disagreement, contribute to nurturing this "literate-orality," where orality retains a central role despite its accommodation with writing.

Ultimately, this writing of orality by historians and anthropologists does not prevent the Gnawa from renewing and redefining themselves. By drawing on the specific characteristic of oral societies, which transmit information through techniques such as repetition, memorization, performance, and improvisation (Goody 2010), the Gnawa continue to reproduce their practices and values, despite (or through) new mediums (the Internet, the media, etc.), and the various historical contingencies that oppose them. In reality, the Gnawa have always had to reinvent their traditions according to social, economic, and political practices (Aidi 2023a). In this sense, “the transformations of the Gnawa are therefore a social and historical production that projects, in the same movement, an image of the society in which they evolve” (Alaoui Btarny 2017).

Faced with this multiplicity of sometimes contradictory narratives, I focused on understanding the reasons behind these inconsistencies and imprecisions, beyond simplistic explanations such as my interlocutors lying to me, not trusting me, or not knowing the “real history.” In the absence of reliable written sources and considering the economic and political stakes surrounding this narration, the importance of determining the "true" history of the Gnawa community has gradually faded in favor of the individual trajectories that make it up. By following my interlocutors, I observed that their ways of presenting themselves changed: artist, musician, *maalem*, singer, healer, *gnawi*, performer, dancer, and *koyo* are all possible self-definitions. That is why, in what follows, I focus on what the word "gnawa" means today and on the dynamics that this categorization generates in a context marked by neoliberal competition.

Afro-Arab music… as long as it sells:

This fluidity of identity, although longstanding, is now linked to market logics, cultural expectations, and political pressures. **Folklorization** fuels **commercialization**, which heightens tensions around **authenticity**, leading to the production of **legitimizing discourses**. These dynamics are framed by national and global **political stakes** tied to heritage **preservation** and market logics.

In his monograph, Bertrand Hell (2002) already reports the beginning of a "folklorization of ritual" with the emergence of what he calls "pseudo-lilat"[6] and Gnawa nights adapted to tourist demand. What was once purely ritual has also become a cultural product. From a historical perspective proposed by Becker (2011), this folklorization is not new. The change in Gnawa practices does not follow a linear evolution from ritual to stage or from "traditional" practices to "modern" tourist practices. Where some authors have seen a decline, a regression of the ritual in favor of the artistic aspect (Hell 2002; Chlyeh 1999), it seems that rather than a break, there has been a separation of spaces and musical styles. Therefore, this is not a rupture but rather mutual influences between these frameworks of interaction (Majdouli 2013). This process of folklorization[7] has helped intensify the commercialization of their music and objects. This manifests both at the national level, through festivals and tourist initiatives, and internationally, through heritage preservation, the professionalization of certain artists, and collaborations with foreign musicians (Aidi 2014). "Traditional evening," "Gnawa Lila concert," "African Music," "World Music," and "Gnawa fusion" are all terms used to market a Gnawa show in restaurants, bars, hotels, and cultural centers. This commercialization intensifies in the summer, the festival season. After the festival performances, the nights continue, with confirmed Maalems, amateurs, apprentices, musicians, fans, and the possessed from all walks of life in houses, streets, beaches, and terraces until dawn.

Without falling into a theory of cultural imperialism (Warnier 1999), we can think here of the interactions between these various actors in the different contexts described above as generating "cultural differentiations and hybridizations" (Danteur 2012). Indeed, the agency of the Gnawa is illustrated in the multiple ways they adapt to these desires to "freeze tradition," which ultimately continues to reproduce it. This invention of "authenticity through performance" (Danteur 2012) appears in some Gnawa who defend folklorization. This is how Gnawa culture is both preserved, adapted, and transformed to meet market expectations. These dynamics, supported by cultural policies, contribute to the "promotion of Gnawa culture" for

6 The lila (lilat in the plural) is the term used to refer to the ritual vigil organized by the Gnawa for healing purposes.

7 "Folklorization" refers to the process of transforming a local cultural practice (often described as traditional, spiritual, communal, or ritual) into an object of representation or performance intended for an external audience, typically for the purposes of tourism, commerce, or heritage valorization. This transformation often involves simplification, staging, or standardization, in order to make the practice accessible or appealing to spectators or consumers (Danteur 2012).

economic and political ends. In the following sections, I explore expressions of authenticity, the search for legitimacy, and dynamics of rivalry and conflict.

The 'True Gnawa': In Search of Legitimacy لي جا كيقولك أنا معلم

In the various settings where the Gnawa perform, play, and heal, there seems to be a need to assert themselves and be recognized as authentic. This expression of authenticity most often came in the form of: "*hna gnawa dyal bsseh* [we are the true Gnawa]." This phrase is often accompanied by some form of disqualification of the other: "that one doesn't even know how to tune his guembri"; "he calls himself a Maalem but learned yesterday"; "I don't like the Gnawa from Casa"; "these young ones learn on YouTube and come to disturb us"; "they play two notes and call themselves Maalem." These positional statements also include: "I'm Gnawi because I grew up in it, even though I play in restaurants"; "I'm Gnawi because I don't play in restaurants"; "I'm Gnawi even if I've never been to the Moussem"; "I'm Gnawi but I no longer attend the Lilat."

Other discursive strategies came from the Maalem I visited. Most of them spent more time telling me about their origins, the successes of their careers, their seniority, than answering my questions. During my first meeting with Maalem Najib Soudani, he talked to me at length about his family. According to him, his grandfather came from Sudan and his grandmother from Mali. His father was a great Maalem and all the Gnawa learned in their home. "I grew up in it. As a baby, I already used to play the tbel. Now, I'm well known, hamdoulah. They call me from all over Morocco to do Lilat or evenings. I've played everywhere. (...) Furthermore, all the journalists come to me. If you tell people in the medina that you are looking for the Gnawa, the true ones, they will inevitably direct you to me." He proudly shares his experiences with journalists, who, after meeting other Maalems in Essaouira, tell him: "It's at your place that there's *hal*." Additionally, he used to play every Sunday in the zaouia of Sidna Bilal. This is why, according to him, he holds "the truth": "Most don't know what it is, even if they play (gnawa instruments). They will tell you nonsense. I know the history of the Gnawa."

On the other side is Maalem Omar Hayat. He challenges those who say, "We are the true ones, I am a descendant of...". For him, a "true" artist (Gnawi or not) works for this recognition. He must keep learning and developing his style to be acknowledged rather than rely on his descent or seniority. For his part, he builds his legitimacy on his dual identity: Gnawi (initiate

Maalem Abderrahmane Paco) and artist (who has proven himself through his unique style and adaptations of old *trouha*). He insists:

> Unlike the young ones, I give value to my art. I don't accept to play anywhere. I've played all over the world. I just returned from the Moga Festival in Portugal. For me, an artist must offer a performance. The Maalem must heal. These are two different roles. The artist should not just sit on stage, and the Maalem should not play standing during the Lila.(...) As an artist, I have always tried to create, to learn more. I worked in a circus in Europe, traveled extensively across Africa, etc...

Depending on the context, they emphasize lineage, learning through transmission, talent, creativity, experience abroad, seniority, fame, recognition by authorities... These criteria are used to recognize or disqualify others or to legitimize oneself. In this cacophony of leadership and authenticity, these are fluid identities constantly rebuilt "by merging overabundant collectives to create an authentic identity" (Lindholm 2015). This movement must be understood in the framework of "paranoia and self-doubt" (Lindholm 2015), which are inevitable in the face of the "homogenizing" logics of the global market and the need to constantly recreate "locality" (Appadurai 2005).

However, it is important that this dialogical approach does not sideline the political stakes behind this process of "conservation" through commercialization. In reality, festivalization involves imposing from above what should be celebrated and how. By carefully selecting the forms of "Moroccan culture" to highlight, festivals legitimize some aspects at the expense of others. Some practices are to be "preserved" at all costs, while others are to be modernized or relegated out of the spotlight. Festivals, particularly through this process of selection and spotlighting, seize the collective imagination, thus becoming an instrument to renew the symbolic power of the Makhzen (Ziou Ziou 2016). In the case of the Gnawa festival, it is the construction of the Gnawa as an iconic symbol of Moroccan culture, even as a symbol of national identity (Becker 2020)."

Political Stakes شكون المعلم ديالك ؟

During the Gnawa Festival in Essaouira in 2022, I attended a conference at the French Institute, where a moment clearly revealed the division between "real Gnawa" and "YouTube Gnawa." The conference was titled "Words of Gnawa: UNESCO Intangible Heritage, Stakes and Perspectives." The speakers included Maalem Abdeslam Alikane, president of the Yerma-Gnawa Association for the "promotion and dissemination of Gnawi Heritage," Abde

Amarir, archaeologist at the Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Communication, Maalem Mohamed Boumezzough, and Maalema Hind Ennaira. Journalist Jihane Bougrine also presented the festival's producer, Neila Tazi, who sat among the audience, thanked by the speakers after each speech, and Zhour Amhaouch, director of the Essaouira branch of the Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Communication. While I cannot report every word of the speakers, I will summarize the main points in three parts.

First, Abdeslam Amarir explained the process of registering Gnawa music as UNESCO Intangible Heritage and what it involves in terms of safeguarding measures. Essentially, this includes improving the status of the Maalems, who will receive artist cards, and projects to pass on tagnawit "as an art of performance but above all as a history and a set of values," including through schools and museums. Then, Maalem Abdeslam Alikane emphasized that: "without the festival, this art would be lost. It has been a long struggle (with whom?) to give value to the Gnawi, who before the festival were despised and stigmatized." This appears to be a battle for recognition beyond the negative portrayal of the Gnawi figure. Finally, Neila Tazi and, later, Zhor Amhaouch spoke about the necessity of research to define "what it means to be a Maalem," distinguish the Gnawi from the musician, and delineate "pure Gnawa." The main challenge seems to be reconciling what they call "tradition and modernity," "creativity and purity," and "preservation and transmission."

The audience then took the floor. What followed was a striking moment revealing the gap between the Gnawa community and other stakeholders, despite years of collaboration. A French participant asked: "Do you still organize *Lilat*? If not, how can one become a Maalem without the ritual?" Young Maalem Mohamed Boumezzough, almost stirred by a sense of revolt, responded by denouncing the rise of "YouTube Maalems" who are not involved in rituals. For him, these new Gnawa lack the legitimacy to call themselves Maalems. He insists: "Gnawa music is primarily a therapeutic trance music. Gnawa is first and foremost the ritual. They may be musicians but not Maalems." He is slowed down by Maalem Alikane, who places a hand on his knee and takes the microphone from his hand. The young man does not back down, saying, "If I said something wrong, apologies Maalem." Maalem Alikane nods and says, "No, no, you’re right."

I draw two reflections from this: 1- Official speeches exist in a dialectic between democratization and preservation. 2- The growing competition, where official heri

recognition, notably UNESCO Intangible Heritage inscription, introduces new hierarchies by allocating resources and status to some while marginalizing others.

"Making Gnawa shine internationally," "being recognized like the folkloric music of other cultures," "giving a better image and reputation to the Gnawi," "valuing the long-marginalized, stigmatized Gnawi figure" are all phrases used by the festival organizers I attended, but also by the written and audiovisual press reporting these events. For these agents, this recognition does not transform the Gnawa culture but helps preserve it. They often highlight "the role of the Gnawa Festival in preserving the pieces" and more generally "the role of civil society in cultural development." Thus, civil society works towards cultural development by "making local culture a product to sell," attracting both Moroccans and foreigners, creating jobs, and generating revenue "for everyone."[8]

In concrete terms, apart from the festival and its economic impact and visibility, the cultural policies planned within the heritage process have yet to yield results for most young Gnawa. In reality, in this competitive environment, despite the professionalization of some, others find themselves forced to combine with different occupations and/or develop their own networks. Therefore, these policies can be seen as a way to instrumentalize bodies for the construction of "images made to be seen" (Cousin 2002), here of an "alternative sacred," of liberalization, and of freedom (Kapchan 2008).

To conclude, I return to the conflicts and dynamics of exclusion that accompany this struggle for recognition.

One day, Hamza confided in me: *"I've always been asked questions like, 'Why are you white? Who is your father? Who is your Maalem?'"* It seems that, for some, one can only be legitimately Gnawi if they are Black, descended from a Gnawi family, or an apprentice of a Maalem from a Gnawi lineage. Hamza emphasized that for many, *tagnawit* must be inherited by blood or passed down from a Maalem. He cited a common Gnawi proverb: *"Cheikh bla*

8 These quotes are taken from another conference I attended, which brought together the same participants. I should note here that this "civil society" advocating for the conservation and promotion of heritage is composed of individuals from the "urban upper middle class" (Ziou Ziou 2016). The narratives presented by these actors often focus on promoting peace, tolerance, diversity, and a balance between preserving traditions and embracing modernization. These themes are echoed in the "justification discourses of the festival" (Ziou Ziou 2016), with additional vocabulary related to heritage, urban development, and tourism promotion.

cheikhou jebHou khawi," which means, *"A cheikh without his cheikh is an empty hive."* This implies that one can never be recognized without being the disciple of a renowned Maalem; without this, they lack baraka (spiritual blessing). He concluded: *"In the end, there's racism even among Gnawa. More than that, it's war."*

Hussein also experienced what he refers to as "discrimination." He shared an encounter with a Maalem:

> One day, I was playing calmly with my friends at a hotel. There was a Maalem who worked as a cook there, but I didn't know him. After I finished playing, instead of congratulating me, he approached me aggressively: 'Where are you from?' I replied, 'I'm from here.' He pressed: 'Whose son are you?' I proudly said, 'I'm the son of the Raiss' (his father was a fisherman). He looked at me disapprovingly and asked: 'Who is your Maalem?' I jokingly replied, 'Maalem Baqbou, but I've never met him. I learned through his cassettes.' He got angry … To avoid such confrontations, I expose myself less. I only play with my friends, and I ask them to carry the guembri on the street to avoid being harassed." Hussein opposes this rigidity and challenges these "strict rules": "I prefer to play in shorts with my surfer friends." He also acknowledged the democratizing impact of certain policies: "The festival took away their monopoly. Even girls participate now.

For other Gnawa, however, the festival has exacerbated inequalities. "Maybe now anyone can learn, but not everyone can call themselves Gnawi, and especially not everyone gets invited to play at the festivals," Hamza noted. He summarized it as follows: "There are Gnawa who will never be (re)cognized because of this institutional divide, which manifests on an individual scale through jealousy (lhssed)." As Becker (2020, 158) put it: "Commodification and self-marketing are not contested, but what is at stake is who controls and benefits from them."

Conclusion:

My research revealed that the Gnawa identity lies in their ability to navigate skillfully between worlds, borrowing norms from here and there, and constantly adapting to contexts through artistic, ritual, and rhetorical creativity. The Gnawa I encountered construct their own narratives, tailored to their strategies for legitimacy in a competitive environment. Mobility thus occupies a central place in their way of life, highlighting the limits of categorical and linear thinking often dominant in academic research. Beyond dichotomies (global/local, modernity/tradition, Arab/Amazigh, Arab/African, orthodox Islam/popular Islam, festival/*moussem*), which ultimately mirror North/South divides, this analysis explores the

permeability of imaginaries and the fluidity of (self-)definitions. I argue that “decolonizing decoloniality” requires learning to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016; Butler 2019).

Since my initial immersion in 2022, I have returned to Essaouira several times. During each visit, I notice that the concerns of my interlocutors remain largely unchanged: the priority is reinventing themselves to meet financial needs. This inevitably leads to disagreements and rivalries within the community. I am informed about recent developments: who now performs in the *zaouia*, who has formed a new *taïfa* (troupe), who has collaborated with whom in a specific festival or *lila*, who has organized a tour abroad, and so forth. Conversations almost exclusively revolve around opportunities and income, while issues of race, gender, or religion fade into the background, integrated into a broader capitalist logic.

Today, *tagnawit* has become a resource exploited by both public and private actors, either for direct capitalist purposes or under the guise of diplomatic and symbolic interests. Investigating religion, therapeutic efficacy, trance, or race remains an intellectually intriguing endeavor, but one risks overlooking the real concerns of those involved today and reproducing the extractive model of research. Fortunately, the Gnawa fully understand what it means to adapt for funding!

Translated from the French by Ikbale Bouziane.

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Claude McKay and His "Fatmas" on Morocco, Modernity, and Masculinity

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French musician Lamine Diagne opened the 2023 Marseille Jazz festival with a show entitled *Kay! Letters to a lost poet*. "If we must die, let us nobly die," Diagne recited to the strumming of a double bass and an electric guitar, "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack. Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"[i] As Diagne recited a French translation of Claude McKay's most famous poem, "If We Must Die," images of George Floyd, Malcolm X, and Tommie Smith raising his fist in the Black Power salute flashed behind the musicians. With these words Diagne also launched "McKay: 100 years Later," a series of events, shows, and publications organized by French politician Christiane Taubira to commemorate the 100 years since McKay first travelled to France.



Figure 1 Poster for the 2023 show "Kay! Lettres à un poète disparu" by Lamine Diagne and Matthieu Verdeil.

Marseille, France's second largest city, has rediscovered the Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay in recent years.[ii] Two of the writer's novels take place there, *Banjo* (1929) and *Romance in Marseille* (published posthumously in 2020). Both books chronicle the lost world of La Fo

a port-side neighborhood that was destroyed by the Nazis in 1943. "It is surprising that it is a black man from a small Caribbean Island who wrote the most beautiful novel about the cultural richness of Marseille," noted journalist Hélène Lee at the launching of "McKay a 100 years later."[iii] In an interview in July 2023, another Marseille-based journalist called McKay a visionary "punk."[iv] The municipal government renamed a small alley in the city's Vieux Port "Passage Claude McKay" in 2015. In 2021, a small publication house in Marseille, Héliotropismes published a French translation of *Romance in Marseille*. In 2022, Héliotropismes also published a French translation of McKay's autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*. *Un sacré bout de chemin* sports a rust-colored cover showing a well-dressed Black man, presumably McKay, walking from New York City's iconic Flatiron building across a black expanse of ocean to the arching gates of a Moroccan mosque. "This powerful and complex book," wrote the French editors in their introduction, which "surprises by its modernity [for McKay is never] duped by the ordinary racism of [the] left-wing white European elite, or by the elitism of the black intelligentsia of the Harlem Renaissance."[v]

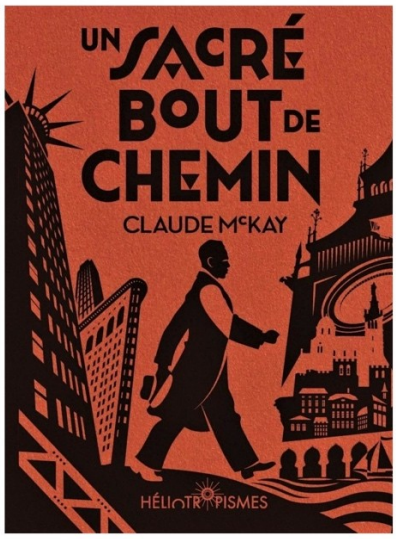


Figure 2 Cover of the 2022 French translation of McKay's autobiography, A Long Way from Home.

Considering his itinerant lifestyle, it is surprising that McKay has left us with any archival material at all. The poet's papers, housed in the Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library comprise 12 linear feet of correspondence, photos, and unpublished book manuscripts, several of which were published in the past few years.[vi] When *Romance in Marseille* came o

2020 it was an immediate hit in the literary world. *Vulture* literary critic, Molly Young, included it in her list of Best Books of 2020, explaining: "It's about bodies, disability, sex, Islam, slavery, and capital. There are lesbians. There is gender-bending. There is socialism. All of this in 130-pages—custom-designed, it would seem, for the modern obliteration attention span!"[vii] Talya Zax, of the *New York Times*, claimed that the book "was so far ahead of its time, it took 87 years to find a publisher."[viii] Modern readers of Claude McKay are fascinated by his exploration of sex, race, and disability in Marseille. But what fascinated McKay most about what he dubbed "Europe's best back door," was the fact that it opened up onto Africa and "the Orient."[ix] Indeed, though les *Marseillais* are happy to claim McKay as one of their own, what McKay loved about Marseille was its African-ness. When the writer moved to Marseille in 1924, the city was the closest he had ever come to Africa.

Those who write about McKay often take his interest in Africa and in the Black Atlantic as a given, mentioning his travels on the African and European continents in passing, as a way to demonstrate how visiting Paris, London, and Casablanca opened McKay's eyes to the shared history and common suffering of Africans and members of the African diaspora.[x] McKay was certainly not the first of his Black American contemporaries to visit Paris. W.E.B Dubois, Langston Hugues, Alain Locke, and Countee Cullen all spent significant amounts of time in the French capital, cementing the reputation of the city as a center of Black internationalism. For Black Americans, France represented *liberté* and *égalité*, if not quite *fraternité*.[xi] McKay was one of the first to use Paris as a gateway to the African continent.[xii] Unlike Cullen or Hughes, McKay was not enthralled by Paris, where he found some of the same megalomania and elitism he had observed amongst his fellow artists in New York. And so, in search of a place where he could feel more at home, McKay turned to the African continent.

Morocco was the only country that McKay visited in Africa. He wrote to his friend and editor Max Eastman that he would travel to Morocco to "go native." McKay's first trip to Morocco lasted a few months between 1928 and 1929. He toured Casablanca, Marrakesh, Tetouan, and Tangier, before returning to France. In 1930, McKay decided to return to Morocco and settle in the outskirts of Tangier. He lived near Tangier from 1930 to 1934. Those years were his most productive; he wrote *Romance in Marseille*, *Gingertown* (1932), and *Banana Bottom* (1933),

last novel published during his lifetime.[xiii] Through his writing, which circulated widely in the Black American community, McKay inspired an entire generation of Black Americans to look towards North Africa. Later, in the 1960s, more Black Americans followed in McKay's footsteps, bypassing Paris and settling in Tangier, Algiers, and Tunis. Black American beat poet, Ted Joans, spent months in Tangier, reading poems at the Librairie des Collones and playing trumpet at Fat Black Pussycat café.[xiv] Black American musician Randy Weston settled in Morocco in 1967 to run his African Rhythms Club in Tangiers.

Though contemporary readers may be surprised by the modernity of McKay's Marseille novels —with their queer, non-binary and socialist characters—a reading of the writer's work on Morocco shows a man very much a product of his time—one fascinated by the Orient and its supposed lasciouviousness. One of the recurring characters in McKay's works, including *Romance in Marseille* and *Banjo*, is the "Oriental" woman or "Fatma"— a feminine trope of ambiguous origins who seduces and deceives Black men. *Banjo*'s only female character, Latnah, is an "oriental" woman who speaks "Arabese."[xv] In *Romance in Marseille*, the main character Lafala fled Marseille after Moroccan prostitute Aslima stole all his money. The "Fatma" is at the center of most of McKay's writings on Morocco, published and un-published. At times servant, prostitute, thief or dancer, she infiltrates McKay's writing, replacing the Black prostitutes, sole female characters, that McKay included in his earlier work. "The Arab girl is growing bigger than I ever dreamed," McKay wrote to his friend Bradley while working on *Romance in Marseille*; "[she is] running away with the book and me."[xvi] The letters McKay wrote his friends from Morocco in the early 1930s are full of anecdotes about "fatmas"—Moroccan women who clean, cook, swim, and party with McKay—never do they have names, their role is purely domestic and sexual. In fact, the possibility of hiring these Moroccan women for their services seems to be one of the central reasons McKay chose to travel to Morocco in the first place. McKay's writings about Morocco reveal a man who did not shy away from racist language or predatory behavior, much like his French and American contemporaries, and ours.

A SERIES OF DETOURS ON THE ROAD TO MORROCCO

Claude McKay was born in a farming family in southern Jamaica in 1889-90. At twenty-two he left his home to study agronomy at the Tuskegee institute. What McKay found when he disembarked in Charleston, South Carolina, was a horrifying system of racial segregation. Disappointed by the regimentation of his student life, or what he called the "semi-military, machinelike existence" at Tuskegee, and determined to leave the Southern US, McKay moved first to Kansas, where he pursued and then abandoned a degree in agronomy, and then to New York, before taking a job on the Pennsylvania railroad.[xvii] He became, in his words, "a vagabond —but a vagabond with a purpose."[xviii] He wandered to write. In his first years of vagabonding across the US, McKay had no desire to return to Jamaica, because he believed that in the US he could "achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America."[xix] McKay was enamored with the US he discovered in New York and Pennsylvania, "awed by its brutal bigness," fascinated by "its titanic strength."[xx] While he suffered from racism, he found solace in the idea of joining this "bigness," this new country he discovered through its miles of steel tracks. In 1919, after publishing "If We Must Die" in *The Liberator,* and after the horror of the Red Summer, McKay desperately needed a respite from the racial pressure-cooker of the US. He accepted an invitation from two of his admirers, "the Grays," and accompanied them on a free vacation to London.[xxi]

Throughout his travels in Europe, McKay offered a shrewd commentary on class and race relations. In London, McKay wrote in his autobiography, "prejudice against Negroes had become congenital" amongst the British. Needless to say, he did not like Britain or the British, whom he found to be "a strangely unsympathetic people, as coldly chilling as their English fog."[xxii] His analysis of race in Britain was no doubt informed by his childhood in the British colony of Jamaica. After London, instead of returning to the US, McKay travelled to Russia, where he hoped to find proof that communism was the only way forward for Black Americans in their quest for justice. McKay spent almost a year in Russia, from September 1922 to May 1923. McKay reveled in the warmth of the Russian people. Locals saw him as "an omen of good luck," even a "black ikon [sic]," he wrote, and "carried [him] along on a crest of sweet excitement."[xxiii] McKay's feelings about communism, however, were mixed. He was fired up by "the thundering mass movement of the people, their boisterous surging forward, with their heads held high, their arms outstretched in an eager quest for more light, more air, more space, more glory, more

nourishment and for comfort for the millions of the masses."[xxiv] The bureaucracy and discipline of the communist system, however, bored him. He was born a poet and could not find a place in the ranks of a Communist Party he saw as too stiff.[xxv]

From Russia, McKay made his way to Paris, where he enjoyed the mix of "radicals, esthetes, painters and writers, pseudo-artists, bohemian tourists," all blending in relative congeniality, particularly pleasant after the "high pressure propaganda spirit of the new Russia."[xxvi] But unlike many of the white expatriates, and later generations of Black artists and intellectuals, McKay was not particularly enamored with the cafes of Montparnasse and the cabarets of Montmartre. He liked the cosmopolitan nature of the city but disliked the niceties of the expatriate circles, often rich and white. He refused to hang out at Gertrude Stein's house despite frequent invitations because of his "aversion to cults and disciples." He liked meeting people as persons, he claimed, "not as divinities in temples."[xxvii] Eager to leave the cold dampness of Paris winters, McKay abandoned the city for Marseille. Overall, Europe had left McKay feeling lonely and out of place and yearning for his native Jamaica. When McKay finally got to Marseille, he was overcome with the relief of living once more "among a great gang of black and brown humanity."[xxviii] In Marseille, at last, after the communist pageantry of Russia and the society life of Paris, McKay felt once more the assurance of belonging to a group.

It was while he was in Marseille that McKay first thought of visiting Morocco. Africa had a quasi-mythological appeal for McKay, as was the case for many members of the African Diaspora in the Americas. In the Senegalese bar he frequently visited in Marseille, McKay started asking around about where to visit in this mystical continent. It was a sailor from Martinique, who had allegedly visited every large port in Africa, that recommended Morocco. McKay's first question was, "What are the harems like?"[xxix] Clearly, McKay had some a preconceptions about Morocco and about the sexual availability of Moroccan women in particular. There were other reasons McKay was considering Morocco, but they palled at the prospect of a good harem. Indeed, McKay was also having trouble writing *Romance in Marseille,* which his editors disliked. They had suggested drastic changes. Fleeing his editors and their thirst for their commission, McKay decided to travel to Morocco to do some research about this North African Black woman character, Aslima.[xxx]

CLAUDE MCKAY SETTLES IN MOROCCO WITH HIS STAFF OF "FATMAS"

McKay crossed from Spain into Tangiers in early September 1928, before proceeding to Casablanca. On this first foray into Morocco, which lasted about seven months, and on his second longer sojourn in the country from 1930 to 1934, McKay was fascinated by the country's relationship to blackness. In his journals, letters, and poems, he wrote extensively of questions of race in North Africa, working hard to dispel European beliefs that Morocco was not part of Black Africa. Apparently, on the boat over to Morocco, some Europeans had attempted to correct McKay's understanding of Morocco as part of the Black continent; to the French, Morocco was *l'Afrique Blanche*. "Themselves divided into jealous cutthroat groups," explained McKay, the "Europeans have used their science to make fine distinctions among people." To them, concluded McKay, who is to know who was Black and who was white. To McKay, it was clear that most Moroccans were Black. "I found more than three-quarters of Marrakesh Negroid," he wrote in his autobiography."[xxxi]

On his first day in the port city of Casablanca, McKay happened onto a group of Gnawa musicians, or as he called them "Guinean sorcerers," preforming what he interpreted as a form of exorcism. McKay was fascinated, as he watched them dance "a kind of primitive rhumba, beat their heads against posts, and throw off their clothing in their excitement." He was reminded of "certain peasants of Jamaica who give themselves up to the celebrating of a religious sing-dance orgy."[xxxii] Despite McKay's enthusiasm for the Gnawa musicians, his language is mired in racial stereotypes; he revels in what he perceives as their primitivism and their desire for nudity, after months in what he considered to be a buttoned-up French high society.

After enjoying the hospitality of various friends in Casablanca and Rabat, McKay travelled to Fez. In Fez, McKay felt he was coming alive. In *A Long Way from Home*, he wrote:

> I felt that I was walking all the time on a magic carpet. The maze of souks and bazaars with unfamiliar patterns of wares was like an oriental fantasy. In Fez I got into the inside of Morocco. Hitherto I had been merely a spectator. But the Fassis literally took me in. There I had my first native meal of cous-cous in a native house, and the first invitation was the prelude to many. […] Excited and intoxicated and fascinated by the Fassis and their winning and welcome ways, I went completely native. I was initiated into the practice of living native and cheaply.[xxxiii]

Throughout his autobiography, letters, and other texts McKay's descriptions of Morocco are replete with orientalist imagery: magic carpets, souks, and bazaars.

In Fez and the neighboring town of Moulay Abdallah, McKay bargained in the souks, in French and in his rudimentary *Darija* [Moroccan Arabic], roamed the marketplaces, and reveled in Moroccan musicians "playing African variations of the oriental melodies."[xxxiv] For the first time in his life, McKay described feeling "singularly free of color-consciousness." He compared it to the feeling of "physical well-being a dumb animal [must feel] among kindred spirit, who lives instinctively and by sensations only, without thinking."[xxxv]

McKay wrote to a number of his friends of the pleasures of Morocco. Throughout his time in Morocco, he kept a regular correspondence with white American political activist and communist sympathizer, Max Eastman. Eastman and his sister, Crystal Eastman, had co-founded the communist magazine *The Liberator,* where McKay had published "If We Must Die." "I feel like I'm settling here for good," McKay proudly wrote Eastman from Tangier in December 1930, "I am a good Moslem now, waring tarbosh and burnous sometimes. I have a little house (exactly like yours at Antibes) for 100 Francs a month out of the town in an Arab village, but I want to change to a place up in the hills. Living is cheap, you get the best meat for 8-10 Francs a kilo, which is a little more than two pounds." No place in the world had satisfied McKay since he left his native Jamaica, as much as Morocco. He often compared Moroccans to Jamaicans, claiming that there were many resemblances in their customs and superstitions.[xxxvi]

According to many of McKay's friends, Eastman included, McKay was at his happiest during those early months in Morocco. He settled into life in the country, donned traditional dress—a tarbosh or fez, and the burnous or long cloak. He was well on his way to "going native," as he claimed. He threw parties, at which he invited American expats, Moroccan musicians, and dancers, and served food as well as plenty of good hashish.[xxxvii] American writer Paul Bowles and American literary agent John Trounstine visited McKay at his house in 1932. "We all went out to see McKay," remembered Bowles, "he was plump and jolly, with a red fez on his head, and he was living exactly like a Moroccan. At one point with a clap of his hands he summoned his Moroccan dancing girl, not yet twelve, and had her perform for us."[xxxviii] A few weeks later,

Bowles and McKay got into a fight—the details of which are unclear. To patch things over, McKay visited Bowles in his supposedly bed-bug infested hotel. Again, Bowles noticed, McKay was wearing a fez.[xxxix]

What delighted McKay the most in Morocco was the inexpensive cost of living. It was in Morocco, at the age of 38, that he was finally able to rent his own house for the first time.[xl] This allowed him to live in relative luxury and to hire servants. McKay employed a boy to run his errands and a girl to cook for him. "I have a nice little Fatma taking care of me," he confided in a July 1931 letter to Eastman, "She is dumb and can't pretend to be intellectual and that is best."[xli]

The term "Fatma" comes up regularly in McKay's writings about Morocco. In French colonial society, colonists, particularly those of modest means, used the name "Fatma" to designate all women who worked as domestic servants.[xlii] My own maternal grandparents, who lived in Agadir, Morocco, as French settlers, from 1950 to 1957, had someone they called a "Fatma" to clean and cook. My grandparents were of modest means, both of Polish origin, and, like McKay, Morocco's cheaper cost of living afforded them certain luxuries, including hiring personnel. Colonists used the word amongst themselves, both because, in a mix of disorientation and condescension they could not remember or refused to learn the correct pronunciation of their employees' names, and because the "Fatma" came to represent a trope in the colonial imagination—that of a servile, quiet, native woman. The term eventually morphed to designate all Arab women of lower classes and in situation of servitude *vis a vis* the French colonialists, be it as maids, as dancers, or as prostitutes. French colonial cartoons, like those by French artist Charles Brouty, portray the Fatma as clumsy and stubborn and as a petty thief **(Figure 3).**[xliii] One 2019 interpretation of a early 20th century pied-noir song by French singer Marc Sinté entitled "Mohammed Couscous" begins: "We called him Mohammed Couscous, he was the nicest of them all, as soon as he saw his Fatima he would sing her these words: '*yata-alla* Fatma come, come roll around in the couscous… come turn around the pot…'"[xliv] To French colonizers in the Maghreb, Mohammed and Fatima were the indistinguishable Muslim couple, with well-defined gendered roles and lascivious tendencies. The term was so insulting and ubiquitous that in 1956 Moroccan cleaning ladies demanded to be called *Les Bonnes* instead of *Les Fatmas*.[xlv]



Figure 3 Charles Brouty's caricatures of "La Fatma," L'Afrique du Nord, December 5th, 1931.

Scholars have not paid attention to McKay's use of this loaded colonial term. In his notes to McKay's poem "A Farewell to Morocco," scholar William J. Maxwell interprets the term as one that McKay himself would have created for women dancers, in homage to the Prophet Muhammed's daughter, Fatima—a term that McKay would have meant as endearing. [xlvi] But far from showing reverence, McKay's account of his domestic servant stays within the colonial (racial and gender) power dynamics. To McKay, as to many French colonists in Morocco, this "Fatma" was good enough to wash his dishes, or to dance for him and his friends, but not much more; she certainly was not an intellectual match to McKay himself.

The "Fathma," in a somewhat different transliteration, reappears in McKay's poem "A Farewell to Morocco," printed in his autobiography. Here the "Fatma" is no longer merely the domestic servant, but also the dancer or the prostitute. The poem evokes the end of Ramadan and the feast at the breaking of the fast, with music, honey, and "fathmas shaking their flamenco feet." With these lines McKay fully surrendered to European colonial objectifications of Morocco, linking Morocco to El-Andalus.[xlvii] While McKay claimed, to his friends and editors, that in Morocco he had "gone native" in reality he had all but "gone colonial," treating Moroccan women like servants and sex objects.

McKay's archives contain other, unpublished, traces of Morocco, all of which point to McKay's fascination with questions of gender and race in North Africa. In 1933, McKay attempted

without success to secure a Guggenheim fellowship. In his application he proposed a novel about racial relations in Morocco, one that would require him to travel across the country to "compare data and gather fresh material." "The main motif will be the Negro element," he explained, "as an integral part of Moorish society."[xlviii] McKay's archives contain two short, impressionistic essays, that he may have wanted to include in this novel, "Lalla Shellah" and "Miss Allah." Though the purported intent of these essays was to write about the circulation of ideas of race in Morocco, both pieces linger on intimate and furtive gatherings between young Moroccan men and "fatmas." Reflecting on the celebration of Lalla Shellah, the European wife of the Black Sultan of Morocco Abu Al-Hassan, McKay wrote of sex between young Moroccan men and "fatmas." According to McKay, if, when the candles were burning low, and one heard the "fatmas' shrill yo-yo! yo-yo!" it meant that "down in a shadowy place a young gallant [was] worming along on his belly through the grass to the spot where a Fatma lies awaiting him."[xlix] McKay was fascinated by such moments when, in a society that he saw as sexually conservative, young men could satisfy illicit pleasures.

A significant portion of McKay's piece "Miss Allah" is dedicated to describing a party organized by two young Moroccan men. A "woman-and-wine party," as McKay called it. The two young men invited two unnamed "fatmas" to dance, pour wine, and clean up after the party. "Moorish parties," explained McKay, "may appear dull on the surface" to an outsider from the Western World, "but the underlying motif of intensity and ultimate desire are dominantly evident and the interplay of simplicity and formal ceremonial is in itself exciting."[l]

McKay wrote extensively about interracial sex between men and women. He was fascinated by the appeal he believed Black women had for white men. He was delighted when, for a short time, he managed to draw his Black American friend, Carmina, away from her little "mouse of a white man," to live with him in Morocco.[li] Again and again in his travels he met Black women traveling with white men, and was slightly nauseated by these relationships, which to him seemed like "white lice crawling on black bodies."[lii] His provocative and at times celebratory relationship to sex complicated his stay in Morocco. On the one hand, he believed that Moroccans were right to hide their women away from European men in their harems. To some extent, he explained, it was precisely this "native fanaticism in sex and religion which [made

North Africa a little more wholesome than the rest of that fatal continent."[liii] On the other hand, he explained in a letter to Eastman, that he felt sorry for "the women wrapped up in yards and yards of cotton and flannel." Apparently, he had brought a few of the "girls of the street" to the beach where they had been swimming in bathing suits, when they were arrested and imprisoned by the Muslim authorities.[liv] McKay does not tell Eastman what happened to the women, nor whether he helped in any way. "The Moors are some of the most sensual and sex-crazy people I know with very reactionary and fixed ideas of outward form," McKay concluded in a letter to Eastman.[lv] Again, McKay understood why Moroccan men would keep their women hidden away —after all he also did not like seeing white men hanging on the arm of Brown or Black women —but McKay did not like these conventions interfering with his own sea-side merriments or sexual escapades.

Early on in his time in Morocco, while visiting the city of Fez, McKay had had the opportunity to see first-hand the black-market economy for sexual and domestic slaves. He visited an old medieval house with a beautiful courtyard where, McKay wrote to his literary agent William Bradley, "young girls—blacks and Arabs are sold—secretly." This discovery didn't seem to upset McKay, who reassured Bradley not to worry: this was not "the white-slavery traffic, nor the old time Negro slavery. It is rather a way of getting a domestic servant or a slave wife."[lvi] Perhaps McKay's complacency stemmed from his reading of this situation as merely one more example of North African men's control over women. Like many white Europeans before him, McKay saw slavery in North Africa, and particularly women's enslavement, as a relatively benign institution, one that fit neatly into his assumptions about North African gender roles. In fact, according to Paul Bowles, McKay was living in Morocco "like a Maharajah. It was incredible. He had a house full of slaves and he just clapped his hands and in they came. It was marvelous. Dancing girls."[lvii]

McKay's relationships to the women of Morocco, or the "fatmas" he frequently mentions in his texts, are unclear. American actress Anita Thompson Dickinson Reynolds, who stayed with McKay in Morocco, claimed that McKay was living in Morocco not out of desire to make a home on the African continent, but rather out of an interest in Arab boys.[lviii] Arab "youths," as he calls them, also appear frequently in McKay's tales of Morocco, often accompanying the

"fatmas" on whatever merriments McKay was organizing. Many of the American friends who visited McKay, Bowles included, had moved to Morocco in part because of the country's reputation as a relative haven for men who enjoyed sex with men, and as a place where, if you were rich, you could buy sex with a variety of people.[lix] The appeal of Tangier and its surrounding areas, to many American men, was threefold. First, Morocco was cheap and thus a good place to pursue commercial, academic, artistic or even missionary goals. Second, sex between men was less policed in Morocco than in the US, in fact American nationals enjoyed complete diplomatic immunity in Tangier, an appealing prospect for young transgressers of all sorts. Third, the appeal of the "young Berber" or "young Moor," eroticized by Orientalist literature, drew many an American man to North African shores.

While some of his friends hinted at his homosexual desires, McKay rarely wrote of his attraction to men. But during the three years he lived in Morocco, he spent much of his time in Tangier and the surrounding areas, where he threw parties for young "natives," as he called them, buying alcohol and hashish, and watching them dance. These young Moroccans seemed to take advantage of McKay's ability to buy alcohol and perhaps also of his relatively open-minded attitude toward sex. They came to play music and party, bringing with them fatmas to dance and cook. "I have a few Arabs who come in sometimes and sing and play music," wrote McKay to Eastman in July 1931, "I give them a little drink, but I never touch the stuff myself-except for a little beer once in a while."[lx] Hard to tell whether McKay's relationship to these "young Moors" and "fatmas" was sexual or that of a doting voyeur looking for titillating company among "the magical and barbaric people" of Morocco.[lxi]

In McKay's texts the "fatmas" rarely have names, personalities, or memorable characteristics other than their seductiveness. But McKay never seems completely seduced. Perhaps it is because, as his friend Anita Thompson Dickson Reynolds hinted, he preferred the young Moroccan men he met to the "fatmas." Still, these unnamed Moroccan women serve as setting for McKay's stories, ways to give his writing an authentic North African flavor—a place where despite his best efforts he was perhaps not able to go completely "native." After all, in Morocco, as an educated American, McKay could become a member of the elite. He used his ability to circulate freely, to buy alcohol, and the relative wealth living in Morocco afforded him, to

establish himself as a member of the colonizing class, with the staff of "Fatmas" that that position guaranteed. To many modern readers McKay seems ahead of his times. McKay's inclusion of lesbian and cross-dressing characters in his descriptions of the boisterous and multiracial 1920s Marseille seduces modern readers, including myself, eager to find traces of our queer pasts. But, in ways that may be invisble to many of his contemporary American readership, McKay also belonged to the racist French colonial world, as a *colonisateur* not a *colonisé*.

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[i] Claude McKay "If We Must Die," *The Liberator*, July 1919. Available at the *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44694/if-we-must-die. For Lamine Diagne's performance of "If We Must Die," see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sP6zolgj8KU.

[ii] For more on Claude McKay see Wayne Cooper's 1987 biography Claude McKay: *Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, a Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), Gary Edward's, *Claude McKay: Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2007) and James R. Giles' *Claude McKay* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976). A number of literary scholars have also written about Claude McKay's work and travels, including but not limited to: Bridget T. Chalk, *Modernism and Mobility: The Passport and Cosmopolitan Experience* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jean-Christophe Cloutier, *Shadow Archives: The lifecycles of African American Literature* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2019); Anne Collett, "Claude McKay and the Pestilential City: The Metropolis, the Clinic, the Crisis," in *Postcolonial Past & Present: Negotiating Literary and Cultural Geographies* (edited by Anne Collett and Leigh Dale), (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Addison Gayle, Jr, Claude McKay, *The Black Poet at War* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972); Josh Goschiak, *The Shadowed Country: Claude McKay and the Romance of the Victorians* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2006); Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and his Poetry of Rebellion* (London: Verso, 2000); Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Peter J. Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literacy Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jennifer K. Ladino, *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature,* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); John Marsh, *Hog Butchers, Beggars, and Busboys: Poverty, Labor and the Making of Modern American Poetry* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011); Joel Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance* (Cambridge University Press; University of Miami, 2018); Nadia Nurhussein, *Rhetorics of Literacy: the Cultivation of American Dialect Poetry* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013); Paul Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Kotti Sree Ramesh and Kandula Nirupa Rani, *Claude McKay: The Literary from Jamaica to Harlem and Beyond* (London: McFarland and Company Inc., 1968); Leah Rosenberg, "Watch How Dem Touris' Like Fe Look" Tourist Photography and Claude McKay's Jamaica," in *On Writing with Photography* (editors Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Michael K. Walonen, "Land of Racial Confluence and Spatial Accessibility: Claude McKay's Sense of Mediterranean Place" in *Geocritical Explorations: Space*

Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies (editor Robert T. Tally Jr.), (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[iii] Hélène Lee cited in "Marseille salue l'écrivain afro-américain Claude McKay un siècle après son séjour dans la ville," *Télérama*, July 6th 2023, https://www.telerama.fr/livre/marseille-salue-l-ecrivain-afro-americain-claude-mckay-un-siecle-apres-son-sejour-dans-la-ville-7016331.php.

[iv] Interview with Armando Coxe on "Claude McKay: poète et vagabond," Toute une Vie, *France Culture*, July 16th 2023.

[v] Website presentation of *Un Sacré bout de chemin,* Héliotropismes, http://heliotropismes.com/livres/un-sacre-bout-de-chemin/.

[vi] For more on Claude McKay's archives, see Brett Hayes Edwards delightful essay-long attempt at figuring out the story behind a picture of Charles Henry Ford he found in McKay's archives, "The Taste of the Archive," *Callaloo*, 35.4, (2012): 944-972.

[vii] Molly Young, "The Best New Novel Was Written 90 Years Ago," *Vulture*, February 6th, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/02/romance-in-marseille-claude-mckay.html#:~:text=The%20book%20is%20newly%20available,from%20syphilis%20and%20other%20distractions..

[viii] Talya Zax, "A Book So Far Ahead of Its Time, It Took 87 Years to Find a Publisher," *The New York Times*, February 5th, 2020.

[ix] Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1957), 69.

[x] Kotti Sree Ramesh and Kandula Nirupa Rani, *Claude McKay: The Literary from Jamaica to Harlem and Beyond* (London: McFarland and Company Inc., 1968), 183.

[xi] For a long time, as scholar Michel Fabre notes, "the image of libertarian France had hidden that of colonial France." Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Algiers: Black American Writers in France (1840-1980)* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 6.

[xii] Two of the founding works on Pan-African thought in Paris were Michel Fabre's *From Harlem to Paris* and the late Tyler Stovall's excellent *Paris-Noir: African Americans in the City of Lights*. Works on these Black Atlantic connections include but are not limited to: Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000); Kamari Maxine Clark and Deborah A Thomas (eds.), *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France (1840-1980)*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pap N'Diaye, *La Condition Noire: Essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Folio, 2009); Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (eds), *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Négritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African-Americans in the City of Lights* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1996).

[xiii] Gary Eddward Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2007), 59.

[xiv] Hisham Aidi, "So Why did I defend Paul Bowles," *New York Review of Books*, December 20th, 2019, https://www.nybooks.com/online/2019/12/20/so-why-did-i-defend-paul-bowles/.

[xv] McKay, *Banjo*, op.cit., 167.

[xvi] Claude McKay letter to William Aspenwall Bradley, December 21st, 1929, cited in the Gary Edward Holcomb and William J. Maxwell, "Introduction," to *Romance in Marseille* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), xxvi.
[xvii] Claude McKay, cited in Wayne Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, a Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 65.
[xviii] Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 4.
[xix] Ibid.
[xx] Ibid, 244.
[xxi] Throughout his narrative, McKay uses "Russia" rather than Soviet Union. Perhaps this is because he spent most of his time between St. Petersburg and Moscow.
[xxii] McKay, *Long Way*, 67.
[xxiii] Ibid, 168.
[xxiv] Ibid, 215.
[xxv] Ibid, 173.
[xxvi] Ibid, 243.
[xxvii] Ibid, 248.
[xxviii] Ibid, 277.
[xxix] Ibid, 295.
[xxx] Claude McKay, letters to Max Eastman of June 27th, 1930 (Berlin) and December 1st, 1930 (Tangier), Lilly Library, University of Indiana.
[xxxi] McKay, *Long Way*, 304-5. In his *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha,* Garry Edward Holcomb posits that what may have attracted McKay to Morocco may very well be the fact that there was a significant non-native population, the result of the trans-Saharan slave trade. (op.ci., 58).
[xxxii] McKay, *Long Way*, 297.
[xxxiii] Ibid, 298-9.
[xxxiv] Ibid, 300.
[xxxv] Ibid.
[xxxvi] Claude McKay, letter to Max Eastman, Tangiers, December 1st, 1930, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.
[xxxvii] Interview with Charles Henri Ford, June 5th, 1972, cited in New York City in Wayne Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, a Biography* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 277.
[xxxviii] Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping, An Autobiography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), 148.
[xxxix] Ibid.
[xl] Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 128.
[xli] Claude McKay, letter to Max Eastman, July 19th, 1931, Tangiers, p 6, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.
[xlii] In his 1969 dictionary of Pied-Noir French, *Le roro*, Roland Bacri explains that Fatma became a term to designate all Muslim women, a synonym to the "mauresque" or "mouquere" from the Spanish *mujer.* Roland Bacri, *Le roro: Dictionnaire patouète de la langue pied-noir, etymologique, analogique, didactique, sémantique et tout (*Paris: Editions Denoël, 1969), 55.
[xliii] Nassima Mekaoui, « La domesticité coloniale en Algérie : la "fatma", une "bonne de papier" "indigène" au XXe siècle», *Le Carnet de l'IRMC*, 18, (septembre-décembre 2016), https://irmc.hypotheses.org/2010. On the usage of the word "Fatma" and the colonists' employment of Maghrebi women as domestic workers see: Caroline Brac de la Perrière, *Derri*

les Héros… Les employées de maison musulmanes en service chez les Européens à Alger pendant la guerre d'Algérie 1954-1962 (Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1987) and Albert Landly, *Le français d'Algérie du nord, étude linguistique* (Paris: Bordas, 1970).

[xliv] Marc Sintes, "Mohammed Couscous," Mes chansons de pieds-noirs, 2019

[xlv] Caroline Brac de la Perrière, *Derrière les Héros, op.cit.*, 104, and Albert Lanly, *Le français d'Afrique du Nord*, op.cit, 42.

[xlvi] Claude McKay, *Complete Poems,* edited and with an introduction by William J. Maxwell (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 365.

[xlvii] Zainab Chemaa, "Mooring Aslima: Afro-Orientalist Diaspora in Claude McKay's Pan-Atlantic Mediterranean Modernism," *English Language Notes*, 59:1, (April 2021): 166-180, 177.

[xlviii] "Plan of study," enclosed in a letter to Henry Allan Moe, 28th of June 1933, Box 4, Folder 114, Claude McKay Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[xlix] Claude McKay, "Lalla Shella," Not dated. Box 9, Folder 288, Claude McKay Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[l] Claude McKay, "Miss Allah," Not dated. Box 9, Folder 289, Claude McKay Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[li] Mckay, *Long Way*, 328.

[lii] *Ibid,* 337.

[liii] Ibid, 331.

[liv] Claude McKay, letter to Max Eastman, September 7th, 1933, Tangiers, 2, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.

[lv] Ibid.

[lvi] Cooper, *Claude McKay, op.cit,* 251.

[lvii] Paul Bowles in *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, edited by Gena Gadel Caponi (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 11.

[lviii] George Hutchinson, "American Transnationalism and the Romance of Race," *American Studies*, 55: 4, (2010): 687-697, 694.

[lix] See Greg A. Mullins, *Colonial Affairs: Bowles, Burroughs, and Chester Write Tangier* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

[lx] Claude McKay, letter to Max Eastman, July 19th, 1931, Tangiers, Morocco, 6, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.

[lxi] McKay, *Long Way*, 338.