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Defining the Nation: Protest and National Identity in North Africa

By Hisham Aidi

Abstract

This paper takes a comparative look at Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria, at the rise of Nubian and Amazigh rights groups, and their attempts to redefine national identity. We examine: 1/ how Nubian rights groups have sparked what is being called a Kushite revival in Sudan, and are pushing for a change in educational policy and archaeological practice to engender a new historiography and national narrative; 2/ how Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria are similarly trying to expand conceptions of national identity, pressing to alter language and educational policy; and 3/ the rise of anti-racist campaigns that are trying to introduce a discourse on slavery, and new norms to define racism, while also pushing for a change in migration policy for sub-Saharan migrants.

Over the last year, much media attention has been focused on the transition process underway in Sudan, with analysts reflecting on the involvement of external actors—Western states, Gulf monarchies and international organizations. Less commented on is the ongoing debate within Sudan about national identity, and the country's relationship to Arab nationalism and pan-Africanism, a conversation that has parallels in the Maghreb. In the last decade, as Morocco and Algeria have attempted a 'pivot' to Africa, long-simmering debates over national identity have entered the mainstream.

The "opening to Africa", as it's called in the Maghrebi press, is driven by multiple factors[1]. For Morocco and Algeria, the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the subsequent conflict in Mali have created a security dilemma in the Sahel. The European Union's decline and reduced access to European markets has prompted both states to look southward for market opportunities, and China's expansion into Africa, and the desire to be the

1. Sami El Khayat, "Les enjeux de la politique africaine du Maroc" Revue Espace Géographique et Société Marocaine, n°15, 2016; https://www.leconomiste.com/article/1033614-comment-le-maroc-tisse-sa-toile-en-afrique

Asian hegemon's junior partner on the continent, have also played a role in the Maghreb states' turn to Africa. It is worth analyzing how the pivot to Africa and the official embrace of pan-African discourse in Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria has created an opening for long-standing social movements that claim a non-Arab identity. One of the least-studied aspects of the so-called Arab Spring is the rise of 'indigenous' (Amazigh) and 'Afro' (black) identity movements that are contesting Arabist ideology, and challenging the Arab nationalist character of the North African states.

Nubian Renaissance

The debate over whether Sudan is Arab, or African, or Afro-Arab, and whether the country should withdraw from the Arab League, has been raging since the downfall of the Bashir regime in July 2019, if not before. Observers have noted that alongside this discourse, a Kushite revival is underway, propelled by the protest movement[2].. Despite the occasional references to the kingdom of Kush and ancient Nubia in the popular and intellectual culture of independent Sudan, it is fair to say that the history of ancient Nubia has long been marginalized in Sudanese political imagination and public discourse[3]. This is largely because the regime in Khartoum has seen Kush as a past to be transcended, and because archeologists of Nubia have long seen the kingdom of Kush as part of Egyptian, not Sudanese history. When the Sudanese revolution erupted in January 2019, images and allusions to Nubia burst into the public sphere. The defining moment of this Kushite revival was the image of activist Alaa' Salah atop a car surrounded by protestors, as she read a poem titled "My grandfather is Tirhaqa and my grandmother is a Nubian queen (kandaka)"[4].

This Kushite revival, catalyzed by the current revolution, has roots in the protest movement that took off in 2007 around the proposed building of the Kajbar Dam in northern Sudan, which would have flooded a large part of historic Nubia, leading to environmental destruction and the displacement of an untold number of people[5]. One Nubian-rights group that emerged then, and has gained prominence since, is the Kush Liberation Movement (KLM), which calls for the teaching of Nubian languages and also participates in peace talks in Juba[6]. The Nubian movements, like their Amazigh counterparts, are reacting to Arab-Muslim authoritarian regimes, and excavating an ancient Nubian past to create a Nubia-centric narrative that can unify Sudan. Thus, Mahmoud Suliman Bashir, Director of Regional Antiquities for River Nile State, organized a conference in early 2020 titled, "The Role of Antiquities and Tradition in the Promotion of Peace". His stated aim was to create a revolutionary archeological project to undergird a new historical narrative and identity for Sudan.

A decolonized archeology is thus emerging in Sudan, aiming to dislodge the northern-centrism that has afflicted the country for generations, hoping to produce a more inclusive historical narrative that challenges the view of the north (including Nubia) as the source of Sudanese history and civilization, while eliding the histories and memories of those on the periphery. Yet while Nubian revival is a response to the dominant discourse of Islam and Arabism, as is the project to decolonize Sudanese archeology, it would be reductive to see this resurgence as anti-Islamist. As historian Noah Solomon noted, "This recent rise of Kush has been made possible in great part due to the sponsorship of the archeological sites by the Emir of Qatar"[7], who is also a key backer of Islamist politics in Sudan[8].

The Amazigh Spring

In mid-June 2011, as Morocco's streets heaved with protestors, the king gave a televised speech where he presented a revised constitution to the public. The new constitution outlined expanded rights for civic associations to introduce legislation to parliament, increased representation for opposition parties in government commissions, and made available more public funds for electoral campaigns. As critics noted,

2. https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-history-has-informed-sudans-revolution https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/three-sudanese-armed-movements-form-kush-alliance
3. Amal Ibrahim Madibbo, "Conflict and the conceptions of identities in the Sudan" Current Sociology (May 2012)
4. Noah Solomon, "New histories for an uncharted future in Sudan," AIAC (May 17 2019) https://africasacountry.com/2019/05/new-histories-for-an-uncharted-future-in-sudan
5. "Sudan's anti-dam movement fights the flooding of Nubian culture," The Guardian (December 12 2014)
6. "Kush Liberation Movement Affirms Its Concern With Sudanese People Issues," Allafrica.com (January 30 2020)
7. Noah Salomon, "What Lies Beneath the Sands: Archaeologies of Presence in Revolutionary Sudan" (POMEPS, May 2020)
8. "Qatar Gives $135 Million to Sudan for Archaeological Projects," Smithsonianmag.com (May 27 2014)

though, the king's myriad powers remained uncurbed. One aspect of the new constitution worth highlighting is the section on national identity, which was a radical departure from the 1962 constitution. Although the constitution adopted after independence did not describe Morocco as an Arab state, it did declare the official status of Arabic in the first line of the preamble. The 1962 preamble underscored Morocco's position in the "great Arab Maghreb" and the kingdom's commitment to "African unity". The preamble of the 2011 constitution doesn't mention language at all. Article 5 specifies that "Arabic remains the official language of the state", but adds that that Tamazight also "constitutes an official language of the state, as the common heritage of all Moroccans without exception"[9].

The 2011 constitution also established that Morocco's "national identity, one and indivisible" is based on the "convergence" of Arab-Islamic, Amazigh, and Saharan "components", and [national identity] is "nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebrew and Mediterranean influences"[10]. It is matter of opinion on what is more remarkable—that the new Moroccan constitution now speaks of Amazigh identity, or that it was only in 2011, following an amendment, that Morocco became constitutionally an Arab state.

The upheavals of 2011 had a discernible impact on Amazigh politics. In July 2011, the Tunisian Association for Amazigh Culture was established; it has since morphed into the Akal (Land) party, the only Amazigh political party in North Africa, calling for an amendment to the Tunisian constitution which, in its preamble, underscores Tunisia's "Arab Muslim" identity. The Akal party also wants the repeal of a civil-status law that bans non-Arabic names for newborns. In 2012, Tuareg rebels proclaimed the Berber state of Azawad (2012-2013). In July 2011, an Amazigh movement appeared in eastern Libya, launching a radio station and makeshift schools. It is currently calling for constitutional recognition. In Algeria, protests led the Algerian government to recognize Tamazight as an official language in 2016. The blue, yellow, and green pan-Amazigh flag has become in some ways the flag of the Algerian hirak, prompting the regime in July 2019 to ban the tricolor. Subsequently, 41 people were arrested for hoisting the flag, and in November 2019, 21 protestors were sentenced to six months in prison, for "undermining national unity"[11].

The advances made by Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria since 2011 have been impressive. There are now Amazigh NGOs and civic associations, such as La Femme Amazigh and Africa Morocco, which advocate respectively for Amazigh women and black Amazighs. There are Tamazight television channels. Algeria has declared Yennayer, the Amazigh New Year, a national holiday. Tifinagh script is visible in government buildings and along highways in Morocco. Saad Eddine el-Othmani the Moroccan prime minister—member of the Islamist PJD party—addressed parliament in Tamazight in 2013, and in 2017, in Tunis, reminded Arab diplomats that they should speak of "the great Maghreb" ("al-maghreb al-kabir") instead of "the Arab Maghreb"[12]. In Morocco, history textbooks, which had long taught that Moroccans—of both Amazigh and Arab origin—had migrated to Morocco from Yemen, have been revised. The Amazigh are now described as the "original" people of North Africa. Recent textbooks no longer highlight the "contact moment" when Phoenicians arrived, and skim over the Arab invasions. Textbooks also evade the question of origins—"where did our ancestors come from?"[13]

The question of numbers and statistics remains deeply contentious. How many Amazigh and Arabs are there? How to define an Arab or Amazigh? When, in 2014, the Moroccan High Commissioner for Planning announced the results of the national census, stating that 27% of the population was Tamazight-speaking, Amazigh NGOs roundly rejected the results, saying the questionnaire judged a person as Amazigh or not, depending on whether they could read Tifinagh, or whether Tamazight was their "maternal language". This approach was viewed as cynical and designed to depress the numbers, since Tifinagh script was only introduced into primary schools in the mid-2000s, and "maternal" is unclear in a country that for decades banned Tamazight from public schools. Mainstream Moroccan Amazigh activists claim the figure

9. Paul Silverstein, "Weighing Morocco's New Constitution," MERIP (July 5 2011)
10. Fadma Aït Mous , "Les enjeux de l'amazighité au Maroc," Revue Confluences Méditerranée 2011/3 (N° 78) pp.121-131; Mohammed Boudahan, "min ajli stratijiat jadidat li istirdad al-hawiat al-amazighiyat li al-dawlat al-maghribiya," al-hiwar al-mutamadin (May 12 2014) http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=444572&r=0
11. http://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20191113-flag-confusion-algerian-courts-condemns-or-acquits-same-charge
12. Fahd Iraqi, "Maroc : qui sont les Amazighs du gouvernement?" Jeune Afrique (May 15 2017)
13. Aly Mouryf, "National identity through historical knowledge in schools" ("al-hawiya al-watania min khilal al-marifa al-tarikhiya al-madrasia" Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM, Rabat 2014)

is closer to 35%-40% in Morocco[14], and want to define Amazigh more on cultural and ethnic grounds. More hardline activists advocate DNA testing as a way to settle the question, to showing that the "pulverizing majority" of Maghrebis are of Amazigh descent, and to demonstrate that the Hilalian invasions—so central to the pan-Arab narrative—had minimal genetic/demographic impact. The frontpage of Le Monde Amazigh (Amadal Amazagh) in August 2019 proclaimed: "Genetic anthropology says: We are all Amazigh!"[15]

Constraints

Despite the gains, Amazigh movements in Morocco and Algeria face varying degrees of repression. In Morocco, the hirak movement in the northeast Rif region began in October 2016 and peaked in June 2017, when a crackdown led to checkpoints, curfews, and military deployments in Al Hoceima and Nador. The other Amazigh protest movement is southern-based and revolves around veteran politician Ahmed Dghirni, a recovering pan-Arabist, who is president of the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party (founded in 2005), which was banned (though not dissolved) in 2008 for being an 'ethnic' party[16].

While the northern hirak movement explicitly harkens back to the Rif Republic launched by Abdelkrim Al Khatabi, and leaders often reference historic Berber figures including Jugurtha and Massanina, the movement does not present itself as an Amazigh movement, speaking more generally of corruption, economic justice, and democracy. The hirak's discourse is infused with religious references and calls for a return to Islamic values. Unlike the southern Amazigh movement, the Rif hirak do not claim secularism, and are Arab-friendly, proclaiming their solidarity with the Palestinians[17].

The activists of the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party seem to have a different audience in mind—secularists, hardline Berber nationalists, the United Nations, "indigenous" movements and the West. This camp calls for normalizing relations with Israel, opposes BDS (the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement which promotes various forms of boycott of Israel) and speaks of the 'Arab occupation' of North Africa. Activists in this camp steer clear of Arab politics, claiming that Arabs have rarely expressed support for the Amazigh cause, and that involvement in Arab political causes would Arabize them in the eyes of the West[18]. But they stand in solidarity with Kurds, Touaregs, and Darfuris as fellow victims of Arab nationalism—and keenly follow the debates in Sudan about normalization, withdrawal from the Arab League, and the revival of Nubian culture. This movement is explicit in its rejection of Arabism and political Islam, but has not been repressed like the Rif hirak, perhaps because of the latter's wider appeal. These movements work off each other strategically, have succeeded in mainstreaming the Amazigh cause, and are pressuring civil society and state officials to define Arab and Amazigh. What is Arabness ('uruba)—is it a linguistic identity, lineage, phenotype, membership in the Arab League? What is an Arab state? If Arabness is political solidarity, they argue, then speaking Arabic, as John Garang once said, should not make one Arab, any more than speaking French would make a North African a Frenchman[19].

A final point on the 'ethnic' question in the Maghreb: Morocco's return to the African Union in 2016 and attempts to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have given the Amazigh cause a boost, because the kingdom's Amazigh heritage has become a diplomatic asset in the Sahel. Much has been made of Morocco's religious statecraft in West Africa—the establishment of the Rabat-based Institute for the Training of Imams from West Africa, and the more recent Mohammed VI Foundation for West African Ulema to ensure "the protection of the Muslim faith and spiritual unity of the African people against all violent trends"[20]. But alongside Sufism, Amazigh culture is now also a source of soft power.

14. The Amazigh-speaking in northern Africa population is estimated to be about 20 million, scattered between Morocco (where an estimated 35 percent is Amazigh-speaking), Algeria (20 percent), Libya (10 percent) and smaller communities in Tunisia and the Siwa oasis in western Egypt. There are also an estimated 1 million Tuareg Amazighs in Mali and Niger.
15. Alondra Nelson, al hayat al ijtimaiyat li al-humd al-nawawii: al-araq wa al-tawidat wa al-taswiyat ba'da al-jinum (The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome) (Beacon Press 2016)
16. Abdallah Bouchtart, Amazighité and the Party (al-amazighiya wa al-hizb) (Rabat 2019)
17. Zakia Salime and Paul Silverstein, "Morocco's Palestinian Politics," Issue 242 MERIP (Spring 2017)
18. "Maroc: le Coran ne passe plus entre Amazighs et islamistes," http://www.slateafrique.com/210635/maroc-lutte-farouche-berberes-islamistes
19. Francis M. Deng, War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan (Brookings Institution Press 2011) p.450
20. Dahir # 1-15-75 Ramadan 1436 (June 24 2015)

'Racial Vocabularies'

Another effect of the Arab Spring and the pivot to Africa is the emerging discourse on slavery and racism in the Maghreb. Local activism, combined with increased migration from sub-Saharan Africa, has sparked a conversation about racism. In October 2018, Tunisia passed a law calling for the "Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination", and defending the rights of the purported 10 percent of Tunisians who identify as black.[21] In Morocco, magazine covers recall the history of slavery and ask "Are We Racist?" In response to EU pressure and a desire for better relations with ECOWAS states, Morocco is also trying to liberalize migration law, launching regularization campaigns in 2014 and 2017. Algeria, in July 2017, began a similar regularization effort.

The discourse on racism in the Maghreb tends to oscillate between loud denialism (e.g. claims that Islam is colorblind and/or that slavery in North Africa was "absorptive"), and wild exaggeration (claims that historically there were no abolitionist voices in North Africa, or that current authoritarian rule is a legacy of slavery)[22]. As in Latin America, where political liberalization in the 1980s gave rise to 'indigenous' and 'Afro-Latin' movements, the political opening of 2011 gave rise to similar movements in the Maghreb. Since the early 1970s, Amazigh intellectuals from Algeria have compared their predicament to that of AmerIndians in Latin America, and have used the term 'indigenous' to distinguish the Amazigh from the Arab 'settler'. In 1993, when the United Nations declared the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, Amazigh activists across North Africa began deploying the discourse of indigeneity and invoking the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The term 'indigenous' (asli) is hotly contested by Amazigh activists with many observing that casting 'Arabs' as 'settlers' or 'migrants' is dangerous, yet the term is used across the political spectrum, especially as land-grabbing by the Moroccan regime and Gulf states has escalated in the Berber hinterland. 'Indigeneity' has become both a discourse and a norm. Arab nationalists in turn reject the concepts of race and indigeneity as colonial constructs.

Anti-racism activists and scholars at CODESRIA, Makerere, and various Maghrebi institutions are engaging with European and American academic writing on critical race theory, racism and slavery, and debating whether works that deploy the language of the transatlantic slave trade, and essentially map the Atlantic onto the Sahara, can be of use locally. Recent social science literature has also relied on New World categories. Buehler and Hang's survey of "divergent opposition" to sub-Saharan African and Arab migrants in Morocco concludes that hostility from less-educated Moroccans towards sub-Saharans has more to do with pocketbook issues than racial prejudice[23]. The survey has been praised for asking respondents whether they support "pan-Arab" or "pan-African" ideologies—thus taking into account recent developments—but the survey claims most Moroccans are "mixed" and follow "Arab cultural traditions" (disregarding Berber customs and traditions), and defines "Black Moroccans" as people of "sub-Saharan origin". It is a common assumption that darker-hued North Africans (Nubians, haratin) are a diaspora, and necessarily descendants of slaves and identify as such. In early 2020, partly in response to this wave of writing, the black Moroccan artist M'Barek Bouhchichi stated: "The issue that we encounter is that any black in Morocco is told to have come from sub-Saharan Africa. And this is where they are wrong. I am from here. I am here"[24].

The term 'diaspora' is as contested as 'indigenous' and 'ethnic'. The media increasingly speaks of ethnicities in Morocco (al-ethniyat), yet activists avoid the term; as Adhghrini observed, 'ethnic' is what state officials labeled the Amazigh Moroccan Democratic Party (AMDP) before banning it. There are television shows and radio programs trying to sensitize people to racism, but the public conversation remains limited to personal/attitudinal racism and not structural racism. Anti-racist organizations—including GADEM, National Council for

21. https://euromedrights.org/publication/law-on-the-elimination-of-all-forms-of-racial-discrimination-in-tunisia-a-historic-step-in-achieving-equality/

22. Mohammed Ennaji, Serving the Master (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1999) Fatima Harrak, "Review: Captivity and Slavery in the Maghrib," The Journal of African History Vol. 41, No. 2 (2000), pp. 304-306;

23. Matt Buehler and Kyung Joon Hang, "Divergent opposition to sub-Saharan African and Arab migrants in Morocco's Casablanca Region: prejudice from the pocketbook?" British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (August 2019)

24. M'barek Bouhchichi, "The Invisibility of Black Moroccans" The Metric (January 22 2020)

Human Rights, Tadamun—are massively disadvantaged, faced with a discourse of Islamic color-blindness, and French color-blindness, which sees race as an insidious construct and an American imposition. Workshops are regularly convened to train activists on how to talk about racism without organizing people into 'races'. But how to refer to black Moroccans—Afro-Arab? Afro-Berber? What is 'Afro'? How to speak of sub-Saharan migrants? The preferred term among NGO activists seems to be 'sub-Saharan', as 'African' would imply North Africa is not part of the continent. Also, can the history of slavery be taught in Morocco without incurring the state's wrath—and should slavery be taught in a North African/Middle Eastern context, or reflecting the recent pivot, in a broader pan-African context? 'Trans-Saharan' or 'trans-African' slaveries? These are some of the questions animating the public discourse on difference and national identity in Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria.

About the author, Hisham Aidi

Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of Redeploying the State (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of Black Routes to Islam (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for Africana, The New African and ColorLines. More recently, his work has appeared in The Atlantic, Foreign Affairs, The New Yorker and Salon. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society. Aidi is the author most recently of Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course Conceptual Foundations of International Politics and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.
Email : contact@policycenter.ma
Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54
Website : www.policycenter.ma