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The Discourse of Identity in the Maghreb between Difference and Universality

Abstract:

The discourse of identity in the Arab context in general and in the Maghrebi context in particular is a modern phenomenon and is of central importance. In the Maghreb this discourse is related to modernization efforts, with the de-colonization struggle and its ideology, and with the nation-state-building genesis, process, and legitimisation after independence. A fundamental part in the developmental process of this discourse, therefore, is the difference from, as well as the non-negotiable and hegemonic presence of, the "Other". The evolution of a Maghrebi discourse of identity in this instance is a peculiar formation of consciousness or awareness with regard to a self-evident constancy, namely, the own identity, which had not been in doubt up to that point. From the challenging encounter with the western European hegemonic "Other" comes the necessity to bring forth such a discourse. The Difference is thus a fundamental aspect in the beginnings of the Maghrebi discourse of identity.

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- Relevant publications:
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The discourse of identity in the Arab context in general and in the Maghrebi context¹ in particular is a modern phenomenon and is of central importance. In the Maghreb this discourse is related to modernization efforts, with the de-colonization struggle and its ideology, and with the nation-state-building genesis, process, and legitimisation after independence. A fundamental part in the developmental process of this discourse, therefore, is the difference from, as well as the non-negotiable and hegemonic presence of, the "Other". The evolution of a Maghrebi discourse of identity in this instance is a peculiar formation of consciousness or awareness with regard to a self-evident constancy, namely, the own identity, which had not been in doubt up to that point. From the challenging encounter with the western European hegemonic "Other" comes the necessity to bring forth such a discourse. The Difference is thus a fundamental aspect in the beginnings of the Maghrebi discourse of identity. This Difference relates to the various levels and realms of the construed identity, to language, culture, and politics².

A further explanation is necessary with regard to language, which manifests a triadic situation: mother language, classical Arabic, and French. Here, language is a constant of identity, with which the various groups surround themselves according to their linguistic identities. Language is a central reference for the cultural and political identities that derive themselves from it. The statement that language has not only a communicative function but also that it renders existence, as it were, finds ample use and legitimacy in our context. The mother languages or the spoken languages in the Maghreb are the various local Arabic dialects and/or the Berber languages, which also vary locally and manifest a strongly oral character. In all cases, this language is oral, everyday, and practically oriented language. It must be noted, however, that the reluctance to fixate the dialect in writing was relatively weaker before colonialization than during or after decolonialization. Thus, classical Arabic and French remained the only languages of writing, and consequently also the languages of education and officialdom.

¹ With 'Maghreb' I am referring to Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, in contrast to the Union Maghreb Arabe as regional political constellation which also includes Mauretania and Libya.

² By 'politics', I understand the official and ideological discourse.

As oral languages, the dialects – both Arabic and Berber – remained characteristic of an uncultivated state of nature, whereby a direct connotation was made with the Bedouin tribal tradition, which manifests originality, but also vulgarity. The socio-cultural level of these languages is the small, regional or tribal community.³

Classical Arabic is really a language of education and officialdom but also the language of the media and of a certain class of intellectuals. The status of classical Arabic gains importance particularly after independence. It is brought into a strong relationship with the written Arabic tradition in general, and with the Qur'an in particular, which renders the language of revelation a sacral character. The cultural and linguistic elimination and marginalisation wrought by French colonial policy, however, also makes classical Arabic a vehicle of resistance as a symbolism of the threatened identity, since French occupied the official public space, both during colonial times and afterwards. The Arabising process in the various Maghrebi countries began in the 1960s and '70s and is still underway. The dominant practice in these countries is still bilingual, French and Arabic. The relationship with the French language here is essentially ambivalent. French is sometimes labelled a foreign language, which can mean a kind of discredit, and sometimes a language of progress. The Maghrebi Francophone intellectuals and the Francophile class do not hide their arrogance or dislike of classical Arabic. The Arabophone intellectuals also show their mistrust of the Francophone and often emphasise the structural status of the Arabic language and its culture for their own identity. The concept, "*al-umma al-arabiya*", the Arab community, is not only a political statement with an ideological, pan-Arab background, but also a carrier of definitions and an indispensable reference of collective identity. Here, the French language, as a carrier of symbols of western culture and modernity, plays a contradictory role, on the one hand a certain attraction for modernisation efforts, on the other, it provokes a dislike and fear of western hegemonic political, economic, and cultural expansion efforts.

The Difference as a strategy of definitions inevitably leads to discomfort, namely, over the fact that the Difference emphasises one's own cultural "specificity", and thus the universal ambition of certain

³ Grandguillaume, Gilbert: *Langue, identité et culture nationale au Maghreb*. Pg. 3-28.

humanistic cultural and ethical values are rejected, among them human rights and democratic values.

In practice, some structures have been presented and some developments ascertained that would speak in favour of a certain modernisation in the Maghreb countries, and which could be helpful to bridge and overcome this chasm between Difference and Universality. This also means a possible conception of Maghrebi identity as a differential process, which cannot be allowed fixation in a culturalistic or ideological way. It also, however, enables a differentiated self-perception, which may legitimise universal humanist values in one's own culture. An integration of humanistic values and world-views in one's own culture becomes a possibility with this approach, without the necessity of an allergic phobia over keeping one's own integrity intact.

An additional aspect of a differentiating view of Maghrebi identity is the religious factor. The Maghrebi societies are overwhelmingly, homogeneously Malikite Sunni Muslim. The religious homogeneity served an additional role for the emergence of a collective national identity. The contradictory exclusivist juxtaposition of national Muslim identity on the one hand, and French colonial identity on the other is manifested most dramatically in the French colonial policy in Algeria. Here the concept of 'Muslims' was synonymous with those who were not assimilated, or better, for those who refused to assimilate and succumb to the colonial hegemony of power. The establishment of the "Association of Muslim Scholars" (*jam'iyat al-ulama al-muslimin*) in May 1931 under the leadership of Abdelhamid ibn Badis had the strategic purpose of safe-guarding the Islamic and Algerian identity in the face of the threat of assimilation as a result of colonial French cultural and educational policies. On May 8, 1945, 45,000 civilians were killed by the French colonial forces in Sétif, Melgoua and Kherrata in eastern Algeria because they had demonstrated for their equality as "Algerian" citizens and for freedom. The massacre of Sétif remained a deeply influential symbol of Algerian history and of collective Algerian identity and it is still conspicuously present in the political discourse. Less dramatic than the genocide of Sétif but all the clearer are the events surrounding the French naturalisation of Muslim Tunisians during the 1930s. To the discourse of resistance the Muslim and national identity was endangered by the French colonial power and its citizenship policy. Although the Tunisians naturalised by France have remained Muslim in faith, they were disowned and

rejected by their Muslim environment and they were not allowed burial in Muslim cemeteries.⁴ The demonstrators killed on April 9, 1934, remained martyrs in the national consciousness, and this day is celebrated annually as the national holiday in Tunisia. These are examples of historical events in which the fusion of the religious and the national elements is concretely obvious. In this context, it must be added that the religious or Islamic factor in the formation of identity in the Maghreb is often equivalent with the Arab cultural identity. Islamic identity and Arab identity constituted the national consciousness and not least due to the confessional homogeneity synonyms. The formation of a national identity in the Maghreb countries represented as a process closely linked on the one hand to the struggle for decolonisation and for the liberation from French colonial power, and on the other to strategies and programmes for the creation of an independent, sovereign nation-state. The concept of a nation-state is characterised by an ambiguity and an uneasiness; because the relationship to the concept of nation in the modern sense is an ambivalent relationship. The concept of nation remained alien, novel and insufficiently rooted in the Arab political tradition. Nation sometimes means 'home' or 'fatherland' (*Watan*) and sometimes the Arab nation, *al-umma al-arabiya*. The nation in the first sense (*Watan*) has politically become the failed result of a western Balkanisation policy to the disadvantage of the unity of the Arab nation, *Umma*.⁵

In this context, the Arabic language serves, particularly in the Maghreb, as reference for the pan-Arab ideological discourse. The French language served especially in the early phase of the Maghrebi nation-states as reference for the political discourse. This reflects the ambiguity and the uneasiness of this situation, at least in its initial phase, because in all constitutions of the Maghreb countries Islam was unmistakably and even in the first paragraphs announced as state religion and Arabic as the national language. The arabisation process in the realms of education, administration, and public official discourse mirrors this constitutional role. As a programmatic task, and simultaneously goal, of the new state after independence, the construction of

⁴ Al-Ghurab, Saad: Der religiöse Faktor und die tunesische Identität. Pg.21-23, and Djait, Hichem: La personnalité et le devenir arabo-islamique. Pg. 42.

⁵ Djait, Hichem: La personnalité et le devenir arabo-islamique. chapters I–II

an authentic national identity on the one hand took place in contradistinction to the uprooting experience and the extinguished collective identity during the colonial era. On the other hand, the development of the country and the socio-economic modernisation were a central purpose, rendering legitimacy to the new state on the international stage. In practice, the attempted modernisation is often understood as a synonym to the west-oriented strategy, since none of the Maghrebi states was able to develop an authentic original model of development which differs from the western model. The newly acquired national Arab identity thus becomes a Trojan agent of the western model.⁶ This becomes apparent in the application of sometimes socialist, sometimes liberal economic policy during the 1960s and '70s in Algeria and Tunisia. These policies, which were perceived as westernisation and alienation by the political opposition, were easily argued with the aid of analogous experiences and associations with French colonialism. The emergence of the phenomena of religious fundamentalism and political Islamism during the 1970s can be brought back to these contexts by means of socio-cultural argumentation.

The reference to the paradox between arabisation policy and modernisation and development policy in the Maghreb countries is justified, but limited. The arabisation policy served in the discourse of power against the mounting accusations by the political opposition as an alibi of diversion from the crisis of development policy. The constructed paradox between arabisation and modernisation, however, often has a background in an attitude which sees this representation as a juxtaposition of incompatible opposites. Thus the Arabic language, as a perceived constant of the identity, is an obstacle to modernisation efforts. This argument is based on two mistaken ideas, the first of which is that the Arabic language is understood as something static and almost meta-historical. Here, the various social and intercultural processes that the Maghrebi societies have experienced, and which possessed their own dynamics, are rejected and ignored. This culturalist perception leads to the confirmation of the prejudiced constructions that refer to rival hegemonies and power relationships. The second mistake is the premise that modernity is something meta-historical and that it is exclusively and can only be European/western per se. This leads to a latent and automatic identification of Occident and modernity.

It cannot be denied that modernity emerged as a process in the European context. An essentialist perception suggests that this European context in its cultural historical features is ultimately a substantially homogeneous unit and consciously suppresses the various intercultural processes of exchange, especially with the Arab-Islamic culture which particularly often took place with an impetus from the Mediterranean and the Maghreb. This culture-centric paradigm, which raises a monopolistic claim to modernity, as well as a universal patent, really manifests crisis on the flip side of modernity, with its colonialist and fascist aspects, aspects that suffered annihilating criticism through postmodernism. In this context a differentiated view and intercultural analysis of modernity is helpful for a better understanding and for overcoming the problems to which I have referred. On this level and with this method of approach, a legitimisation and foundation of modern values with their universal claim beyond culturalist hegemonies could be made. In the argumentation for and conception of human rights and basic liberties as achievement and important aspect of modernity no culture should be excluded. Culture as defining space for identity must be understood as a process and in no way as statically transcendental. Identity can also be seen and constructed as an open, dynamic process and in a relational rather than an essential manner.

In conclusion, this intercultural approach offers, firstly, a wider perspective for a conception of the Maghrebi discourse of identity, which may be useful for an escape from the eternal, nihilistic clash of the dogmatic identity trap. Secondly it might offer an opportunity for the establishment or adaption of modernity in the Arab-Islamic context in general, and in the Maghrebi context in particular.

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⁶ Grandguillaume, Gilbert: Langue, identité et culture nationale au Maghreb. Pg. 3-28.