

‘Otherness’ and Andalusian ethnogenesis in Tunisia; exploring one’s identity through the encounter with the other

The problem of being a minority in the Middle East and North Africa

The use of the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘minority’ in the context of Middle Eastern and North African societies often has negative connotations and has undergone severe scrutiny.

One of the reasons why the term is often loaded with suspicion is the fact that during the time of colonial European rule, it was common for western powers to try to overemphasize the internal divisions within the societies they wanted to control with a view to exerting a policy of ‘divide and rule’, the more divided a society is, the weaker it is to face external threats. Knowing of this, colonial powers recurrently patronized specific religious and ethnic groups with the view of developing trusted client elites. As the Ottoman Empire begun to fade, European powers quite often developed their relationship to particular regions of the Middle East and North Africa through the establishment of discreet contacts with given groups, something that over time evolved into a situation in which colonial interests were increasingly conflated with the interests of specific communities (certain Christian communities, non-conformist Muslim sects, and culturally specific groups), creating networks of patronage specially designed along ethnic or religious lines. These relationships turned to be simultaneously advantageous and problematic for the groups that Europeans saw as their natural allies and that in theory were supposed to benefit. The effects this has had in the Maronite communities of later Lebanon, or on the Copts of Egypt are well-studied examples.

Later on, as European powers designed new states on the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, they felt the urge to identify what they saw where the primordial features of these communities and articulated specific rights of several people’s groups, based on what they considered it was their specificities. Thus, although the Ottoman Empire had never before used the minority terminology to speak about particular groups, it did develop a policy by which non-Muslim communities were characterized by a differentiation of status that determined its relationship to the ruling powers vis a vis the rest of society. This marked a clear differentiation between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The later implications of what it was to be understood as being part of a ‘minority’, was, nevertheless, ulterior European incorporation. In this new interpretation of the term, the group would become primarily suspicious of the majority for being a priori reluctant of granting them the same rights than those of the rest. The concept of a minority would then acquire an added meaning of the sort of underage, “not yet having the rights of the adult majority” (Rowe, 2019, 4).

Andalusians never underwent the process of being specifically singled out for their cultural specificity. Neither this happened under Ottoman rule, because they were Muslims and were considered substantially conforming in terms of religious praxis, nor did it happen once the North of Africa became part of the Italian and French colonial endeavors. For example, the creation of the Berber Dahir, a code created by the French Protectorate in 1930 and applied to a variety of Berber communities in the areas in which they did not follow shari’a, meant that

Berbers were to be either protected, or singled out by the status granted as a result of these codices.

Andalusians, that in the early days were granted few special conditions, these were always considered circumstantial and associated to the conditions of their settlement, reason why, these exemptions and prerogatives would disappear as the years went by.

Another important issue with regards to Andalusians as a group is that they have contributed to define the cultural and religious identity of the 'majority', that is of the Arab-Islamic heritage of the region. There is plenty of cases to attest this, but we can mention for example, the appropriation of Andalusian cultural heritage and material culture as symbols of national identity. Example number one is the chachia, example number two is the ma'alouf.

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For all the reasons mentioned, many Middle Eastern communities are wary of being referred as minorities, and a common complaint referred to this attribution is that they feel being singled out from a majority, divided and taken away from their fellow citizens. And Andalusians are not different in this regard.

So, in my study I will study what does it mean to be an Andalusian in Tunisia today, and I aim at opening up a debate, though this case study of what should and should not be consider an ethnic group, on the limits, challenges and possibilities being brought about by the usage of certain ways of referring to oneself and to ones' group, and the ways in which this narratives shape forms of solidarity, imagines forms of future living and so forth.

In fact, a very good example on the wariness about the misuse of the term minority led to a major firestorm in the press and even to public riots in Egypt in 1994. The turmoil resulted from a conference co-organized between an Egyptian research centre and the British minority rights group about Egypt's Copt community, labelled as 'the Copt minority', and public backlash followed in saying that foreign powers were fueling communal differences to weaken Egyptian society and that it was inappropriate to call the Copts a minority, given that they are living in their homeland.

The case we are studying here call us to question, can we speak about ethnicity and/or minority in the case of the Andalusians? And what can be the consequences of doing so?

The case against the use of the term minority has already been posed. It is accentuated in this case by the fact that Andalusians are central in shaping the cultural core of the national discourse, yet maintain certain practices that differentiate them from a wider mainstream cultural locus.

The role of history in cultural identity building

The other issue that complicates the matter is the usage of the lenses of historical inquiry to approach what we may call ‘the Andalusian question’. When one tries to find what has been previously said about Andalusians what one finds almost exclusively, is historical studies.

Without denying the enormous value that the study of the past has for the preservation of the Andalusian identity, to the extent that we can affirm that to a great extent an important part of being an Andalusian today is to acknowledge oneself as participating in a particular series of narratives about a shared historical past. However, the stress on the historical dimension has entailed into the identity of the groups, a sense of past nostalgia, of endangered culture, of final days. This trend in which both scholars and members of the community participate is not unique of Andalusian identity, and it is something Andalusians also share with a number of other middle eastern ‘minorities’. In here the most prominent examples are of Christian Middle Eastern groups (Dalrymple’s Holy mountain, a journey among the Christians of the middle east, or Jenkins’ lost history of Christianity). But, as Rowe has already suggested, the almost exclusive historical approach that exists to the study of these communities has had two unintended consequences that appear sometimes as antithetical.

On the one hand, it is clear, that knowing of one’s community historical past has arisen the interest of many Andalusians in their own history, and therefore, we can certainly affirm, that there is an interesting symbiosis established between historical knowledge and ethno-revivalism. I would add here, that it often not those studies characterized by its academic scrutiny and rigor that make the greater impact, it is often its more diluted, ‘for all audiences’ sort of cultural products that has had a greater impact in the revival of ethnic sentiments among Andalusians. For example, documentaries about the Andalusian legacy in Tunisia, being broadcasted in the national TV, do have a much more important impact than one may otherwise predict.

On the other hand, however, the prevalence of historical studies as the almost only source through which we academics and the public try to understand Andalusian identity, has also often had a quite more adverse consequence, the seeing of one’s cultural identity as a remnant of a dying past, as a fading vestige of past glories. This nostalgic component crucially contributes to shape the ways in which the communities see themselves today.

In my study, for example, asking about Andalusian identity and what it means to be Andalusian in Tunisia today, often turned into conversations about the preservation of immaterial culture, the efforts to maintain a cultural heritage against the backdrop of a capitalist society that makes the means of production typical of a ‘traditional’ Andalusian culture unsustainable, it was about recording words that will ‘soon no longer be used’.

And this narrative of the nostalgic past has its own heroes of ethnic identity salvation:

1. The woman who is learning to sew Farashias before the last Andalusian tailor passes away.
2. The survival of a segmented chachia industry in which important parts of the manufacturing process have been engulfed by the dynamics of capitalist globalization – importing merino wool from Australia because it is cheaper than maintaining the

centuries old Andalusian production and treatment of merino wool in Tunisia. The import of synthetic dye from Europe, because using natural Tunisian dye turns adds too much to the final price and so on.

3. The lowering of the gaze and the sadness of people explaining me on repeated occasions about the death of last ceramist who made roof tiles following the traditional Andalusian technique

All these narratives are accounts of a collective being that is being lost. No wonder why a significant part of the institutional involvement with regards to the Andalusian trope has to do with projects of preservation and restoration. For example, the Spanish government was involved in the works undertaken at the 1. Mausoleum of Sidi al Kacem el Jellizi, and at the 2. Minaret of the central mosque in Testour.

Being an Andalusian today

The study I am undertaking looks at the continuous dynamic shaping and reshaping of Andalusian identity today. One of the problems encountered here with the use of terms such as ‘cultural identity’, ‘ethnic group’ or ‘minority’ is that it puts the emphasis on unity and a certain degree of homogeneity, a sense of cohesion that is quite often a fiction. An illustration of this, is the very different ways in which the building of cultural identity among Andalusians is affected, creating diverse ‘modes’ of cultural identity.

One big difference in the ways of enunciating cultural identity has to do with ‘location’ of origin, and ‘geography’ and we identify four different loci here: 1. Mejerda Valley, 2. the coast and the Cap Bon area, 3. the capital, Tunis, and 4. The diaspora in Europe and North America. These genealogies contribute to shaping different ways of approaching and understanding what is, what does it mean and how one becomes aware of this signifier, “being an Andalusian” and highlight the internal differences that exist within the community (enriching and problematizing the original question, what is to be an ‘ethnic group’?).

Another element, is the conditions that make possible the ‘becoming’ Andalusian, that is to say, what particular social circumstances activate the search of one’s cultural identity. In that we see four ‘modes’, largely conditioned by time – the generational component:

1. An older generation that inherits from their parents an (almost exclusively historical in nature) interest on Andalusian identity and the past – we can inscribe this phenomenon within the understanding of cultural identity as ‘family history’.
2. A more recent interest in Andalusian identity that begins with the effects of crony capitalism, the policies of the infitah, economic privatization. This generates the worsening of the economic circumstances of our protagonists. And the losing of privilege is what seems to motivate the search for an ‘Andalusian glory’.

3. This culminates at the time of the revolution, when the economic crisis reaches its peak and the political crisis opens up the field of seeing Tunisia, for the first time, with ‘postcolonial/postmodern’ lenses – i.e. issues of identity appear in public debates, with more and more people questioning, who are we as a society? What is then to be a Tunisian? The appearance of the Islamist as a significant social actor, unknown to many Tunisians, and the birth of the recognition of the fact that Tunisia has several ‘culturally distinctive groups’. In this context the elaboration of a chart that recognizes the rights of several ‘minorities’, the increase in reporting of cases of racism against considered ‘black’. In this context, a new revivalist trend appears among Andalusians, of enunciation of their cultural specificity, of return to the ‘roots’ and so on.

4. The fourth event that motivates ‘becoming’ Andalusian, is migration. Tunisians living in Europe and in the US enter social multicultural fields in which one’s personal identification as someone coming from North-Africa follows two main tropes: the religious identification, being a Muslim and identifying with other Muslims, and the ‘ethnic’ one, mainly as a result of the salience of the discourse on Berber identity, for which the diaspora communities have played a central role.

Finally, a third categorization emerges from the interplay between the previous two. In other words, how a generational shift is intertwined with the circumstances brought about by geography. In this, we see how each of the categories of the first bid intersect with those of the second to generate almost unique forms of identification with ‘Andalusianness’. By using this frame of intersectionality, I will now discuss a group of cases (seven cases) that show significant similarities. In all these cases, we find the following elements:

1. The subject lives in a village with mixed population (i.e. sometimes the majority of the population is Andalusian, in others is not, but there is people in the town recognized as ‘not being Andalusians’).

2. The subject is from a family that use to have a privileged position. In particular, these are families well inserted within the system of political favoritism and economic patronage developed both during Bourguiba’s and Ben Ali’s times.

3. In all the cases, the younger generations, subjects of this analysis do not enjoy the same economic status that their parents and grandparents. The family as a whole suffers the consequences of this economic deterioration. In three cases there is the selling of property due to economic needs. In five cases there is, at a later stage, migration of the youngsters, either first to the capital, and then abroad, or directly abroad.

4. The episode that triggers the search for a past is, according to the interviewees, an instance of encounter with someone signified as an ‘other’ that is experienced negatively: a ‘racist’ attack. This happens in all cases among young people. The perpetuator of the attack is always someone from initially a more disadvantaged social

position. He is a key element in this construction and I will call him the *constitutive other*.

In three cases, they are identified by the interviewee as ‘bedouins’, and in all the rest more vaguely, as people from the village who are not Andalusians.

I will here bring a vignette that will help to illustrate these cases:

The man comes from a small village in the Medjerda valley and he does not want me to reveal the exact place of origin. Other cases have occurred in the same valley as well as in the coastal areas. More than one case has been reported in the towns of Kelaat al Andalus, Bizerte, and Tebourba:

In the year 1973 there was a big flooding in the bed of the Medjerda river [...]. In the area where I lived there were several Andalusian families, who made a living out of agriculture. I lived there as a child but had never had an interest in knowing about the history [of the family]. Then, when the floods came, they affected severely the structure of our home and we had to move to the home of my grandfather, which was at the center of the village. [In another occasion, he explains to me that his grandfather's house is a typically Andalusian traditional house, with a central patio, windows with flowers and tiled walls]. In there, I had, for the first time, neighbors that perceived me and my siblings and cousins, as foreigners, and did look at us as if we were not Arabs. They incited other children in the village not to play with us, and call us ‘esbagnours’, which means Spaniards. It was then that I began asking my father why the inhabitants of the village did not love us and he kept telling me, ‘it is only because we are better than them’. This answer never convinced me. With the years I came to know that the inhabitants of the village [that were not Andalusians] came to see my family as foreigners that have appropriated the land that should instead belong to the ‘original’ villagers, because the government of that time [when the Andalusians arrived from Spain] offered them benefits in the form of land. For this reason, the children of the neighborhood were always distant with us when we played together and considered us from the bourgeois classes. I felt hatred every time I met them. When I was older, I wanted to know if this happened everywhere and I started connecting with [Andalusian] people in other towns and I came to know that this state of hatred due to a supposed privilege occurs in many other places too. [The cases he speaks about are from Kelaat al Andalous and Tebourba].

Things to consider from this vignette:

1. The issue of building ethnicity from the point of view of the advantaged not of the disadvantaged makes us reconsider ground theory on identity (from Althusser, Derrida and Foucault to Butler) in which the advantaged sees himself as normative therefore ‘normal’ (e.g. white, Arab, man, heterosexual). As a result, anyone not seeing himself or herself reflected in this pattern of normalcy builds up a discourse of ‘identity’, homosexual, Berber, black, women, etc. What happens when the advantaged is the one

that constructs the discourse of difference? The discourse of difference ‘we are Andalusians’ appears the moment in which they see their privilege questioned. The passage from ‘part of the majority’ to a minority status is here evidenced when the respondent says the *constitutive other* did not consider them Arabs, but foreigners. When in reality, it is often the other way around, Andalusian traits have often been used in Tunisia, and in the rest of the Maghreb, to define an Arab-Islamic identity that is perceived as the core of national identity. The distinctive minority within the majority that it is used to define the majority (e.g. Ma’alouf).

2. The same historicity that is used by Andalusians to build their sense of uniqueness.
3. “*We Andalusians brought to Tunisia advanced agricultural techniques and have contributed to enrich this society with our knowledge of irrigation, etc.*” is presented by Andalusians as both,
 - a. 1, sing of benevolence of Tunisian powers (in contrast to the vileness of the Iberian authorities) and
 - b. 2, a recognition and anticipation of the positive effect the Andalusian component will have in Tunisian society. Related to these two positive effects is envisioned the reason of why they were granted land. In stark contrast, the constitutive other uses the same historicity to speak about how someone cultural splendor is always dependent on the other being decried of the right to access resources (in this case land).

This case clearly explains what Hall defines as the role that power relations play in building identities.

Identities, he argues, are much more about difference and conflict, than they are about sameness, communion and solidarity, because at the birth of each identity there is always a “*play of specific modalities of power, and are thus the product of marking of difference and exclusion, than they are a sign of naturally-constituted unity [...] above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed thorough, not outside difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only thorough the relation to the other [...] to precisely what it lacks [...] that the ‘positive’ meaning of [...] identity can be constructed*”.

Concluding remarks

It crucially looks at the question of identification. We can denote two layers in the use of identification here: 1. The sense of one’s recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal and with the natural closure and allegiance established on this foundation. 2. The second sense contrasts with the ‘naturalism’ invoked by the first sense and employs a discursive approach which sees identification as a process never completed, always on the making. It uses a set of determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources (a given history, a set of cultural practices, defined lexicon, etc.) and sees this building blocks as

necessary to sustain it. Then there is the contingency the conditional subjectivities of each person that embark in the act of identification.

The process of identification has the subject's objective of 'total merging' it is a fantasy of incorporation and of belonging. It operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and making of symbolic boundaries. It requires what is left outside, 'the constitutive outside' that is central in the meaning of what is 'inside'.