

Introduction

In 1966, Charles-André Julien, a major historian of the region known as the Maghreb or North Africa, published a small book in the well-known series “Que sais-je?” designed specifically for a large public. He called his work *Histoire de l’Afrique blanche* (*History of White Africa*), an unusual title, but not a new one. In 1939, Émile-Félix Gautier, an architect of the construction of the Maghreb, had published a book with a similar title, *L’Afrique blanche*.¹ But Julien’s book was different; it was written by a staunch anti-colonialist, an unapologetic communist, and an unwavering defender of the region’s independence. His book came out in a postcolonial context, and with a title that could not leave the reader indifferent. Readers then, as now, were accustomed to associating blackness with Africa and Africa with blackness. Both whiteness and blackness are indicative of a relation to progress – the first embodies it, the second lacks it – wherever the people these abstracts signify might go, even outside of Africa itself. Whiteness is an attribute of Europe. It is as if Julien wants to tell his contemporaries that Europe does not have a monopoly on whiteness; Africa is also white. Which Africa? For Julien, it is the northern part that includes not just the Maghreb, but Egypt as well.

Roger Le Tourneau, also a major historian of the region, reviewed the book and saw it as dealing with two rather distinct subjects within this entity of White Africa: Egypt and the Maghreb. He explains that the book

deals with two subjects more separated than united. In fact, the Nile Valley is turned towards the Near East (*Proche-Orient*) and the eastern Mediterranean since the beginning of historical time whereas the Maghreb

¹ Emile-Felix Gautier, *L’Afrique blanche*. Paris: Fayard, 1939. White Africa, in the view of Gautier, is not the same as the one we find in Julien. Abyssinia is white, in the view of Gautier, and the Maghreb is specified as *Afrique blanche française*. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of Gautier.

is decidedly attached to the western Mediterranean and often to the Iberian Peninsula.²

Julien's French audience then, and even now, would have easily understood his definition of the region: the Maghreb is neither part of the Middle East (of which Egypt is a significant part) nor it is really Africa. If both are comfortably located in northern Africa, the Maghreb is on one side, west, by itself, not even part of West Africa, which is genuinely Africa, while Egypt is on the other side, east, not part of what is called East Africa, but part and parcel of what is known as the Middle East, a bloc mostly located in Asia. Egypt was meant to be a leading nation of Arabs, a hub of Arab nationalism, the geographic center of the Arab Middle East, and the heart of its political and intellectual renaissance. The Maghreb was then (as it is now) a region whose construction the present book deconstructs: a geographic bloc by itself, with a history of its own, and an important zone of Francophonie in French postcolonial eyes.

"Maghreb," "Egypt," "White Africa," "Black Africa," "Africa," "Mediterranean," "Middle East" – all are names invented at one point or another in modern history, and each meant different things at different times. Today, these names are postcolonial denominations with specific meanings, the genealogy of which can be found in colonial times, since France stepped foot in the region with Napoleon's expedition on July 1, 1798. Napoleon and his savants defined modern Egypt; his successors, some of them also his companions in Egypt, engaged in the redefinition of the region west of Egypt – that is, the Maghreb – as early as the 1830s.

Before 1830, Le Tourneau's definition of the Maghreb would have been impossible to formulate as he did. The region was then perceived not as a single unit but as partly Ottoman and partly the Kingdom of Fez, or the Sharifian Empire. Officers of the French army who landed in Sidi Ferruch on June 14, 1830, would not have understood the definition a future historian such as Julien or Le Tourneau offered to them. Even seven decades later, by 1900, their definition would hardly have made sense to a Frenchman in Algeria or in France. The Maghreb did not exist yet, even though its embryo could already be found in the

² Roger Le Tourneau, "Book Review, Charles André Julien, *Histoire de l'Afrique blanche*. Paris: PUF, 1966," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 1966 (2): 252–253.

tremendous work of the Exploration scientifique de l'Algérie. It took nearly a century to formulate. The concept of the Mediterranean itself was unclear, and the Middle East was not yet born.³ Even British Egypt looked more Napoleonic than Arab, and the entirety of the Levant was still part of the larger Ottoman Empire that also stretched into Asia and Europe, as European maps of the eighteenth century showed, despite the difficulties of the Ottomans in retaining these lands.

In 1966, the definition of the region Le Tourneau put forward was so familiar, so natural, that most probably Le Tourneau and Julien did not doubt it as a natural entity.⁴ Something drastically important must have happened between 1830 and 1966 to make such a definition possible, comprehensible, and even natural. That thing was not only colonization by itself, but an entire process of colonial creation that transformed several precolonial entities into one single entity with an identity that makes it separate from others and distinct from anything else. This book is about how this definition became possible, understandable, and, by dint of discursive repetition, natural – that is, believed to be there, to exist independent of human consciousness. Thus, the book is about problematizing a name, and also a region, or rather, the conception of a region, with its geography, its population, its language, and its history. The book is an examination of geographical imagination; it is about the history of how the region was constructed and reconfigured throughout French colonial rule in the region.

The history of the region's colonial construction is also the history of the operation of colonial technologies of power, the dynamics of colonial institutions, and the creation of systems of geographical truths that changed and autocorrected as colonial power advanced militarily and became more technologically effective. By colonial technologies of power, I mean essentially the institutions French colonial administrations set in place, first in Algeria, and then in Tunisia, and Morocco, each of which functioned as a colonial state in and of itself, with

³ Anne Ruel, "L'invention de la Méditerranée," *Vingtième Siècle* 1991 (32): 7–14. Florence Deprest, "L'invention géographique de la Méditerranée: Elements de réflexion," *L'Espace Géographique* 2002 (1): 73–92. Hélène Blais and Florence Deprest, "The Mediterranean, a Territory between France and Colonial Algeria: Imperial Constructions," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 2012 (19)1: 33–57.

⁴ As it appears from Julien's history of the region, *Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord*, a volume Roger Le Tourneau edited and updated.

a distinct political status, power strategy, and modes of knowledge harnessed for each type of governmentality.⁵ Yet their separation is more apparent than real, for they were an extension of the metropolitan state, their coordination is necessarily through it, and their operation is what gives the state its imperial status. These institutions operated through the use of force (violence), and the use of ideology (knowledge). These institutions harnessed the arsenal of European technologies to operate: armaments, modern instruments of research, print machines, and so forth. The results were modes of modern knowledge that take different forms – historiography, anthropology, geography, archaeology, linguistics, statistics, biology, zoology, etc. – yet are all governed by the same episteme, and in their function are part of the same enterprise of recording a colony with a colonial mind.

The history of this construction is also the history of the dynamics of power between colonial modernity and its local subjects and their traditional institutions (families, mosques, *zawiyas*, *awqaf* foundations, libraries, etc.) that acted and reacted within the dynamics of colonial power and according to rules set by it. This is not to say that this is a history of colonial domination and local resistance, but rather that colonial power itself creates the field in which the native operates, and thus the native can only operate in a field alien to him, whose vicissitudes he tries to manage, with different strategies to reinvent his present. In so doing, he becomes an historical actor, a cognitive operator, willingly or unwillingly, a political actor complicit in a game whose rules are set by colonial powers.

This book covers the historical period during which the Maghreb was constructed as a geographical area between two other colonial entities, Africa and the Middle East, from long before the conquest of Algiers to the time of independence, and beyond – to our present. For the presence of Europe did not start with the conquest of Algiers and undoubtedly did not end with the end of the Algerian war. The region was scrutinized, explored, made sense of, even mapped and named before French soldiers landed in Algeria. It is upon a precolonial body of knowledge that their conception of the region was constructed. It is

⁵ Technologies of power is a concept Foucault uses in relation to biopolitics, but the concept (originating from the theorizing of Althusser) can also be applied to the production of knowledge essential to governmentality. Louis Althusser, “Les appareils idéologiques de l’état,” in *Positions: 1964–1975*. Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1976. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

also upon a process of translation of Islamic texts known in Christian Europe that strategies of knowledge were set up. Colonial conquests made these strategies more effective by harnessing advanced technologies and implementing them on the ground to continually execute physical transformations of the lands, the cities, the regions, and of course the populations to conform the representation to its referents and to adjust the referents to the representation, as colonial administrators saw fit, according to colonial interests that were not only material but symbolic as well. The book seeks to understand the processes by which that construction was made and by which it came to mean something that people then, as now, understand as most familiar and most natural. The book, then, is a history of a name or a history of a concept. Being so, it is also a history of a construction, a reconfiguration, a full-fledged invention of an entire geopolitical, geocultural, and geostrategic entity that includes reconfiguration of lands, reordering of history itself, recategorization of populations, restructuring of their modes of life, and redefinition of their modes of thought and ways of being.

By the late 1920s, the Maghreb region had emerged as a French colonial zone in North Africa that was separate from the Middle East, itself a post–World War I British invention.⁶ The Maghreb includes mainly Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and not so much Libya. I am writing the history of the creation of the Maghreb as a distinct geopolitical entity, neither really Middle Eastern nor totally African. I intend to examine how the Maghreb, which is still largely perceived through French scholarly lenses, was transformed by drastic and multiple strategies of colonial power and how, in the process of its transformation, it was divorced from the larger region now referred to as the Middle East on one hand, and from the region commonly called Africa on the other. Indeed, the Maghreb region seems to be neither. Even between the Arab Middle East and the Arab Maghreb, there is undoubtedly a divorce, as Jacques Berque once put it.⁷ Because the history of the invention of the Maghreb is also, and in important ways, the history of this divorce between the so-called Maghreb and the so-called Middle East, this book not only traces the genealogy of the

⁶ Daniel Foliard, *Dislocating the Orient: British Maps and the Making of the Middle East, 1854–1921*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017.

⁷ Jacques Berque, “Perspectives de l’Orientalisme contemporain,” *Revue IBLA* 1957 (20): 217–238.

Maghreb but also helps outline how the Middle East, both as a name and as a geopolitical, geocultural, and geostrategic entity, came into being. The book will thus be of great interest to Middle Eastern scholars across a wide range of disciplines who may be interested in how their region is defined openly or tacitly in relation to the two entities from which it was detached. Again, the Maghreb is neither Africa nor the Middle East – neither is it even Africa *and* the Middle East, despite the fact that it is also understood as culturally Middle Eastern and geographically African. Therefore, even academically, the unit fits in neither African studies (understood often racially – that is, in terms of color) nor Middle Eastern studies (defined mostly through the British colonial experience and the culture of nationalism generated in the region). By comparison, the Maghreb seems more French, or it is viscerally francophone, with its particular brand of nationalism(s).

Fernand Braudel once wrote:

Behind all of human history there is this actor who is quick to transform, but always so adroit, so pressing, so decisive in his interventions. What shall we call him? Space? It says too little. Land? It is ambiguous. Let us call him the geographical milieu.⁸

The geographical milieu, I would argue, is an actor only insofar as it is imagined as such in a historical narrative (for example, France invaded Algeria); used this way it is only metaphorical. However, upon examination, it is only a conception – one that has been constituted through time, resulting from a complex process of cultural production. The Maghreb is not a person and neither is France.⁹ It is a geographic milieu, imagined and defined by men who inhabit it. A geographical milieu does not have a natural existence; it does not exist outside of human consciousness. It exists only insofar as its existence is imagined. In historical narratives, the Maghreb appears as an actor, but it is an actor of narration (for example, the Maghreb resisted Rome). Therefore, as a construction, the Maghreb is the result of cognitive activities of historical actors (military officers, politicians

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Colin, 1949.

⁹ Braudel considers it as such, following in the footsteps of Paul Vidal de la Blache. “We willingly repeat the words of Michelet: ‘France is a person.’” Samuel Kinser, “*Annaliste* Paradigm? The Geohistorical Structuralism of Fernand Braudel,” *American Historical Review* 1981 (86): 68.

and diplomats, scholars, and all other types of colonial agents). These cognitive activities consist of modes of composing objects, strategies of writing narratives, the politics of representation, and the navigation of institutional powers in which all these actors are caught (that is, colonial power dynamics).

Africa and the Middle East too were invented simultaneously through a long colonial process and according to specific patterns, politics, and modes of knowledge.¹⁰ West Africa and Egypt in particular were constructed in relation to the Maghreb. Westward, the region had to be separated from a bloc perceived according to schemes of thought specific to nineteenth-century Europe, especially France: race, religion, notions of frontiers and borders, history, language, climate, and so forth. Race, because of its centrality in modernity, was instrumental. Southward, it was also instrumental, along with what seemed to be natural frontiers separating black from white. Eastward, Egypt was already constructed by the *Expédition d’Égypte* as distinct. These constructions, the African ones and the Egyptian ones, required the complicity of natives to give them form and shape, even beyond the colonial period.¹¹ This complicity is not necessarily a collaboration; it is the result of power dynamics within which colonials and locals act and react; power is indeed everywhere, but not held to the same degree in each place or by each person or each group.

Old Configurations

The idea that Egypt and the Maghreb constitute two distinct areas does not seem to be only a colonial idea. An entire Arabic historiographic tradition also separates the two. Colonials seem to have inherited this separation and not invented it. In Greek geography and historiography,

¹⁰ On the Middle East, see Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper, eds., *Is There a Middle East? Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. Also see Folliard, *Dislocating the Orient*. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. On Africa, see V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

¹¹ For Africa, see Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*. For the contribution of Egyptians to the construction of Egyptian identity, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Egypt is decidedly part of Asia.¹² It appears so in the geography of Ptolemy and the historiography of Herodotus. The Romans inherited this distinction. For them too Egypt was distinct from the land they called Africa. Arabic historiography seems to have only inherited this separation. In one of the earliest books dedicated to the Arab conquest of the region, *Futūḥ Miṣr wa-Ifriqīyah* by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 871), the region is separated, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam adopts the Roman name of the region: *Ifriqiya*.¹³ The name *Ifriqiya* is evidently derived from the name *Afri* that designated a people. Historian Brent Shaw comments:

Located inland of Carthage, in the region of Wadi Tine ... they became stands-ins for all other local or indigenous people of the land. Others like them became *Afri* or *Africani*, and metonymically, the land was called Africa. Over time, by cultural and political extension, the term came to designate a continental mass – the Third World, the *tertia pars mundi* of their time – as it was seen by outsiders in the Roman Mediterranean.¹⁴

However, neither in the Roman definition nor in the Arab one is there any mention of *white* as an adjective describing the region – the way it is mentioned by Julien and by Gautier before him. Even though occasional reference to color and phenotypes existed in Roman times as well as in its Islamic period, the region was never defined by its color. In modernity, it is essential since European civilization itself was self-defined by color – that is, racially as white. Race has become a key concept in the ideology of modernity that explains human differences and human moral and intellectual inequality – that is, human progress and its opposite, human backwardness and retardation.¹⁵

Separated from Egypt, the region went through transformations. In Islamic history, the region is known by a series of names; sometimes it was perceived as a single unit, sometimes as part of other units in

¹² For a general history of the continents, see Christian Grataloup, *L'invention des continents: Comment l'Europe a découpé le monde*. Paris: Larousse, 2009.

Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley, California University Press, 1997.

¹³ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr wa-Ifriqīyah*, ed.

Charles Torrey. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1920.

¹⁴ Brent D. Shaw, “Who Are You? Africa and Africans,” in *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jeremy McInerney. London: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 527–540 at p. 527.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Race and Race Thinking,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1966, pp. 158–184.

Europe (Andalusia) or in sub-Saharan Africa. One can undoubtedly write the history of these transformations: the logic behind the renaming, the cutting of parts to link them or to separate them from a core, the categorization of populations, the identification of religious affiliations, and so forth. Suffice it to say that in Arab historiography from the fourteenth century until the eighteenth, the plethora of Greek and Roman names for the land and the populations disappeared as if they had never existed. The general identification of *Africanus* (which St. Augustine used to self-identify)¹⁶ is not to be found; neither is there any trace of the identities Numidian, Gaetulian, or Musulamanian, or the names of Mauretania Tingitana, Mauretania Caesariensis, and others.¹⁷ Only a few of these names survived in early classical Arab historiography: names such as *Ifriqiya* and *Tripolitania* (called *tarâbulus*) were still used in medieval Arabic historiography.

However, in colonial times, many of these old Roman names resurfaced and were reactivated. Colonial authors, politicians, and ideologues reused them to connect Rome to France, and antiquity to modern times, in a process of creation that harnessed new technologies of power and produced novel modes of modern knowledge, most of which are still in use today. This creation, though specifically French, reached a European audience and was echoed in the historical modern discourse. For example, by 1949, when the region was already formed and its name was already established, anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard reproduced some of these names, combining old and new ones to describe the region. He reproduces the understanding of the region as a single bloc with Libya as a liminal space, not fully Maghrebi and not entirely Middle Eastern. For him, Libya is divided into three entities: Tripolitania, Fazzan, and Cyrenaica. The first two are closer to the Maghreb; the last is rather part of the Middle East: “The people of Cyrenaica,” he writes, “are linked to the classical Arab world of the East, to Egypt and the Jazirat al-‘Arab (Arabia, Palestine, Iraq, and Syria) rather than to the Maghrib.”¹⁸

¹⁶ “In a letter to his former teacher from the city of Madauros, the Christian bishop Augustine of Hippo wrote to the ‘pagan’ rhetor Maximus: ‘well now, [you] as an African writing to other Africans, and since we are both from Africa . . .’ (Aug. Ep. 17.2).” Shaw, “Who Are You?” p. 527.

¹⁷ For more details on these names and on the different configurations of the region, see Yves Modèran, *Les Maures et l’Afrique Romaine (IV^e–VII^e siècle)*. Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2003.

¹⁸ Edward Evans-Pritchard. *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 47.

As a prelude to this book, I would like to briefly evoke the configurations of the region in its precolonial times. By this, I do not intend to write the history of its invention in precolonial times, but only to show that between the colonial and precolonial came a drastic transformation. It is not that the region was constituted in various ways throughout history only to culminate in its postcolonial configuration, as a historicist suggested long ago.¹⁹ But it is true that its colonial configuration is what makes the present. This configuration is only one reality amongst a series in a history during which the region was reconfigured in various ways, named differently, perceived differently, associated with some blocs and dissociated from other blocs that were themselves products of their historical moment. In other words, it is not that the Maghreb has had a formation of its own that led to its present identity, but rather that throughout history the region has been configured time and again – and what the historian believes to be a historical Maghreb may be only a manifestation of the colonial creation whose history I examine in this book. For one of the characteristics of modernity is exactly its power to destroy and reinvent, to eliminate and create. If “modernity extinguish[es] various possibilities,” it also created new ones.²⁰ Those possibilities were not only cultural, political, and economic but also geographical.

In the Islamic period, one can trace different configurations of the region from the ninth century with Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam to the fourteenth century with Ibn Khaldûn. A good number of Arabic texts by historians, geographers, and travelers show the configuration of the area. At times it is extended to include sub-Saharan Africa or part of Europe and particularly Spain, with Marrakech as a capital. At other times it is restricted to geographical segments connected to other geographies and other polities, as was the case on the eve of colonialism when the region was divided into units one of which was sovereign (al-Maghrib al-Aqsâ, the Sharifian Empire in European terminology) while others were semi-independent, but still attached to the Ottoman Empire (for example, the Regence of Algiers, the Regence of Tunis,

¹⁹ Abdallah Laroui, *L’histoire du Maghreb*. Paris: Maspero, 1970. The same view is repeated by the author most recently; see interview, “Le Maghreb est l’idée d’une élite,” *Zamane* 2012 (18).

²⁰ Talal Asad, “The Trouble with Thinking,” in *Powers of the Secular*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 243–303 at p. 274.