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# Moroccans in Trouble

By  
*Anouar Majid*

People have been asking me about Moroccans lately. It wasn't long ago when the questions centered around the kasbah, Marrakech, camels, and the like. The typical questions that upset many Moroccans and amuse others. Now the questions are different, or, rather, they are not questions at all, but mere quizzical statements. Moroccans blew up the train in Madrid (on March 11, 2004). A Moroccan, wearing a *djellaba*, killed the controversial anti-Muslim Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh (on November 2, 2004). Momount Bousakla, a Moroccan-Belgian socialist who criticizes Islamic fundamentalism, is now under police protection because she received death threats from Muslim extremists. My colleagues walk up to me and tell me that a Washington, D.C.-bound plane from Paris was diverted to Bangor, Maine, because two Moroccans had to be taken out and deported back to France. One of these men was on a U.S. "no-fly" list. My friend forwards me the sad news of the deteriorating relations between Muslims and Jews in the Spanish enclave, Melilla. Burqa-clad women now walk the streets of that old town, while Jews are ready to flee in case they come under attack. Isn't it time to ask, like Bernard Lewis did, "what went wrong?"

The prayer calls that came out of the minarets were mesmerizing, very spiritual and moving. They had a Moroccan ring to them, a Moroccan accent. Holy men shook the hands of European-dressed women, and beards had a way of illuminating faces, making them radiant, not dark and vengeful.

After the terrorist attacks on Casablanca, I wrote in my Critical Dialogues column on Wafin.com suggesting that Moroccans of my 40-plus generation had never known this sort of Islam before. Those of us who grew up in cities like Tangier knew an Islam far more tolerant and peaceful. People prayed for their souls and their community; they had no desire to change the world to their liking. Many devout Muslims preferred watching Spanish television (there were no satellites then) and interacted happily with Christians and Jews in the city. Some prayed during the day and had a couple of drinks at night. Many didn't pray at all; they simply

A new sensibility began to seep into the fabric of Morocco's Islam. The language of politics was now suffused with a vocabulary manufactured on the hot terrains of the Middle East and, later, Afghanistan.

went around doing their business. The beaches were splendid and clean, and *imams* (including highly influential ones of puritanical lineage) publicly praised *al-jamal* (beauty) on café terraces.

Moroccans were, on the whole poorer than the current generation. People's needs were limited to the basics—food, a modest wardrobe, coffee money and the like. At that time, going to Europe required no visa (imagine that!), yet very few passport holders chose to leave the country. Sure, they saw all the glitter on television—the nice cars, beautiful women, lots of delicious cheeses—but, no, thank you, they preferred staying home and making do with what they had.



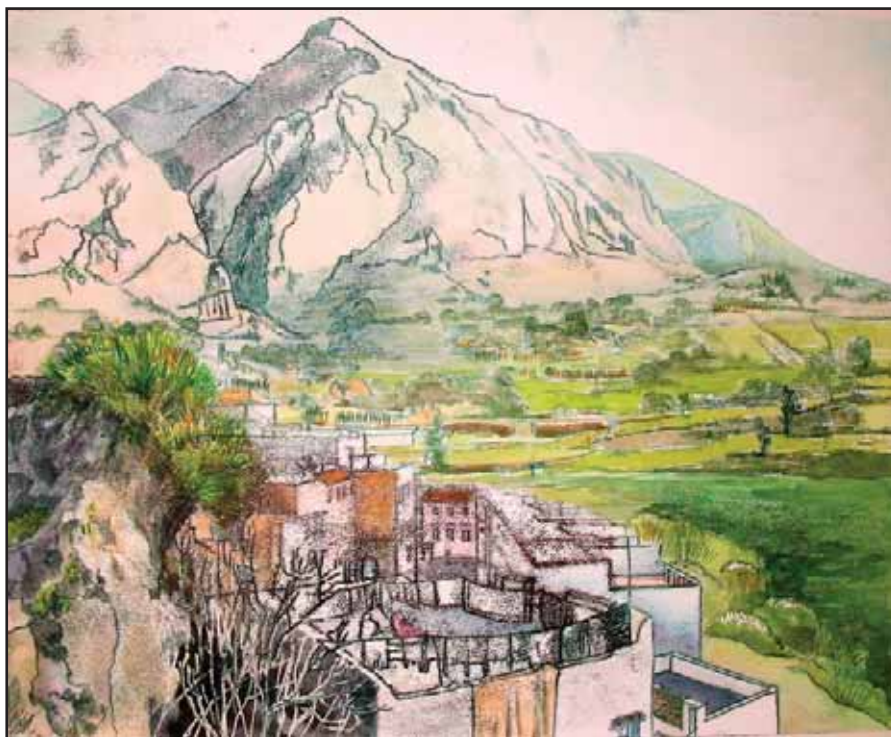
*Calla Lilies*, oil, by Tania Beaumont

The prayer calls that came out of the minarets were mesmerizing, very spiritual and moving. They had a Moroccan ring to them, a Moroccan accent. Holy men shook the hands of European-dressed women, and beards had a way of illuminating faces, making them radiant, not dark and vengeful. The only *mujawwid* (Koran public reader) I listened to, one who has always transported me deep into meditation, was Abdelrahmane Ben Mousa; there were other good readers in Egypt, and perhaps in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, but Ben Mousa sounded like a relative, one whose voice I knew. He was part of my everyday landscape and emotions. We are, after all, the products of our local environmental.

This was, by and large, the environment I grew up in. Then, beginning in the 1980s—or perhaps earlier, who knows how and when these things start?—people began listening to sermons on tapes imported from the Middle East. Some of these fire-and-brimstone preachers were spellbinding with their highly literate oratory. They talked about corrupt Muslims leaders, Palestine, the Soviet Union, and the United States, all in one breath. No room for nuances was made. It was the Russians, the Jews, and the Americans who were fighting Muslims. Preaching would be less effective if people had to qualify their statements constantly. A new sensibility began to seep into the fabric of Morocco's Islam. The language of politics was now suffused with a vocabulary manufactured on the hot terrains of the Middle East and, later, Afghanistan.

This is the era of CNN, TV5, and Al Jazeera. Western and Eastern voices clashed in Moroccans' heads, but the power of Al Jazeera is unmistakable.

Meanwhile, the West kept beaming its images of consumer nirvana on Muslims' television screens. As life in Europe and America looked enticingly rich and easy, life on the ground, there in Morocco, felt correspondingly worse. Never mind if people were now buying 500 dirham sneakers, or copies of brand-name clothes; never mind if the most modest family would scrounge to buy a color TV and a satellite dish to go with it; and never mind that people, on the whole, seemed to be eating better, life was simply getting worse. It felt worse, and the worst part was there was no way out.



*Chefchaouen from the Kasbah*, monotype and watercolor, by Tania Beaumont

As frustration built up, so did the intensity and cacophony of imported sounds and images. Responding to calls for *jihad* in Afghanistan and Bosnia originating in the Middle East, some Moroccans volunteered and came back to indoctrinate their brethren. Meanwhile, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera TV station set up shop to broadcast its own voices and images, finally speaking to the repressed feelings of the passive Muslim consumer. The Spanish channels of old that we were able to catch through tall antennas have now become obsolete, relics of an old age tossed out into the bin of history. This is the era of CNN, TV5, and Al Jazeera. Western and Eastern voices clashed in Moroccans' heads, but the power of Al Jazeera is unmistakable. There are now cafes in Tangier with two TV screens—one dedicated to Al Jazeera, the other at the disposal of customers interested in something else.

Yet Spain, right there on Tangier's horizon, tantalizes and beckons more than ever. Feeling stuck in their bleak social conditions, Moroccans embark on *pateras* and throw themselves at the mercy of the ocean, hoping to land a chance in prosperous Spain, or, if luck permits, other parts of Europe. If Spain blocks its shores, then there is Italy. But the contrast of Western freedom and prosperity and barren social landscape of tiny towns and villages is unbearable. Life is not worth living in poor Morocco.

In the end, life in Europe or Morocco turns out to be limited anyway. Indignities and social exclusions pile up. Then a Middle Eastern preacher tells young Moroccans in Spain about the duty of *jihad*; the same happens in the Netherlands and Belgium. Al Jazeera continues to beam images of embat-

tled Muslims. Life seems to have little meaning, and there are no prospects for hope. Life seems to have little meaning, and there are no prospects for hope. Young, disoriented Muslims could have a cause now, one that will shore up their self-esteem and give them purpose in this unjust world. The rest is violence.

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This is, in very simple terms, what goes wrong; the problem is there are no quick fixes. Morocco doesn't have enough resources—or, better still, doesn't yet have the structure for a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities—to alleviate the alienation and disenchantment of semi-rural and out-of-town Moroccan youth. The West has locked its gates, although its luring images come knocking daily on the television screens in shantytowns and out-of-sight villages in the Atlas mountains. Al Jazeera shows images of killed Muslims everywhere, confirming the youth's impression that the world is full of sound and fury.

The thing to remember as we read articles in this issue is that the violence we are now witnessing has nothing to do with Islam at all. I am not saying this to exonerate Islam from this global mayhem, but to remind ourselves that religion is an outlet for people's grievances, not the cause of ill feelings. Whenever life appears meaningless and out of focus, religion offers solace and guidance, and, in the worst cases, motivation to fight back and employ terror. To fight religious extremism in Morocco and Europe, we need to find ways to give young people hope in the future; we need to let them know that the societies they live in are also theirs, that they have as much of an opportunity as French, Dutch, Spaniard, or bourgeois Moroccans do; we need to give them a good education and find ways to introduce them to the rich canons of the Western tradition and classical Islamic thought; they need to know that no history is perfect, and that all human beings are desperately searching for meaning in a world of glossy surfaces; in other words, they need to see the people they target as confused as they are.

Everyone needs to question his or her fundamental beliefs. Those who treat Muslims as second-class citizens need to remember that nothing is fundamental, that societies change, and that change is the only constant of history. Muslims will be Dutch and French in due time. Muslims, on the other hand, need to resist the temptation of seeing their religion as the best not just for themselves, but also for others. It's all right if a Moroccan Belgian woman doesn't believe what others do; she has the right to her opinion, as much as the Muslim has a

right to his. Why do Muslims feel profoundly threatened by any criticism of their religion? Such defensiveness makes Muslims look like immature children who cannot deal with different opinions. Just as Europeans deal critically—or not at all—with Christianity, so should Muslims. Europeans even resisted saying that Europe is a Christian culture when drafting their constitution. Things change over time, even religious practices and convictions.

In short, we need more models of coexistence and open-mindedness, and fewer theologies of truth and certainty; we need to develop more humane economic systems that meet the basic needs of all and stay away from the winner-get-all culture that fires the passion of violence and terror. We must learn to see ourselves in the other.



We are delighted to feature articles by Mark MacNamara, an experienced U.S. journalist, now residing in Morocco; Mustapha Hamil, a Moroccan comparatist at the University of West Georgia; Aniss Bendrif and Matthew Haney, two young internationalists and activists on behalf of peace, minorities, and youth issues; an evocative poem by Said Leghlid; and reflections by historian Paul Burlin on the recent U.S. presidential elections. We are also proud to feature the original work of the Tangier-based British artist Tania Beaumont. With 35 years of experience in watercolor, oils, and various printmaking media, her critically acclaimed work, which was recently exhibited at the Lawrence-Arnott Art Gallery in Tangier, is influenced by the “strong colors and bright sunlight” of the various Arab countries she has visited. The artist told me that the work featured in this issue is inspired by the “colorful characters in the [Moroccan] markets” and the “stunning [Moroccan] countryside, ablaze with wild flowers, in spring.” I hope Ms. Beaumont's art will bring some cheer to those of us who have to endure the wintry climes of the north.

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# The Headscarf in the Dutch Political Context

By  
*Anass Bendrif and Matthew Haney*

*The article below was submitted for publication in September 2004, more than a month before the murder of Theo van Gogh, the controversial Dutch filmmaker by a 26-year-old Muslim Dutch of Moroccan descent. That event, which took place on November 2, 2004, and the ensuing social conflicts made headline news around the world and brought the long-simmering tensions between parts of the mainstream Dutch population and the country's Muslim minority into full view. Although this article was written before this crisis exploded (and may, therefore, seem somewhat dated), we feel it still provides a good context for the events that have been unfolding in the Netherlands. (The Editor.)*



Scene in open-air Brussels market. Photo by Merouane Touali.

Since the end of the Cold War, the debate in Europe over Muslim immigration and integration has taken center stage. Formerly homogeneous European nation states have transformed themselves through immigration into multicultural and multi-ethnic societies. European communities

that in the past rarely had to face ethnic differences are now confronted daily with not only visible ethnic diversity but also with new found conflicts of values and interests. As a result, debates over the meaning and value of "integration" and "citizenship" are raging throughout Europe. Advocates of multiculturalism argue that immigration and diversity

strengthen European societies, while the detractors of multiculturalism see it as causing the destruction national identity. This discourse permeates numerous political debates, including those over national tax and redistribution policy, asylum issues, and even European Union integration.

In any case, the bodies of Muslim women have become the site of contestation over not only the place of Muslims in European society but also the entire multicultural project.

Islam has been central to this debate over multiculturalism within the “new Europe.” A major reason why this has been the case is a simple one: a large number of Europe’s new immigrants come from the Muslim world. After immigrating to Europe from Turkey, North Africa, Pakistan and other places throughout the Muslim world, over 12 million Muslims now call Europe home, which has made Islam Europe’s second largest religion. As a result, the debate over multiculturalism and immigration has often turned quickly into a debate about Islam. In many cases, Islam is framed as a fundamental threat to the culture, values and identity of European societies. Many argue that multiculturalism cannot work because Islam is inherently incompatible with Western society. Rooted more in age-old stereotypes of Islam and Islamic societies than today’s realities, Muslims are often portrayed as undemocratic, violent, backward, intolerant and oppressive against women.

It is on this latter point—the role of women within Islam—that there has been the fiercest political debate. For many, the headscarf (this term will be used interchangeably with veil and hijab) is a simple cloth that many Muslim women use to cover their head for religious reasons; as defined in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, hijab means cover, wrap, curtain, veil, and screen. When hijab is used in the Koranic context, it also carries connotations of separating the sacred from the mundane. However, it is important to note that the contemporary Muslim vernacular, hijab is used interchangeably to refer to 1) the entire ensemble a woman wears in front of non-intimates to cover her whole body, with the exception of her face, hands, and feet, 2) loose opaque, non-distinctive clothing, and 3) the philosophy of dressing and acting modestly.

The word hijab comes from the Arabic word hajaba. According to Professor El Kerdawi, an Islamic scholar and Director of the European Council of Fatwa, hijab is not a merely a cover dress but, more importantly, it is behavior, manners, speech and appearance in public. Dress is only one facet of the total being. Most scholars say that women are obliged to wear the hijab; however, according to some contemporary voices like Fatima Mernissi, a feminist and sociologist, there is a need of a new interpretation of the Koran, as she claims that wearing the hijab is not obligatory.

Hijab in the West has become symbolic of the ills and intolerance of Islam and a lightning rod for the opponents of the “multicultural nation state.” Detractors of multiculturalism in the Netherlands and beyond have offered it as visible evidence of not only the failure of integration but also the incompatibility of Islam with European culture and values. On the other hand, many Muslim women have turned the table by presenting the veil as a visible manifestation of their identity and thus a political statement on their right to assert this identity in a multicultural society. In any case, the bodies of Muslim women have become the site of contestation over not only the place of Muslims in European society but also the entire multicultural project.

The Netherlands is hailed by many as the “world’s most tolerant nation.” It was the first country to open marriage to the same sex couples, regulate prostitution, approve and control euthanasia and allow the over-the-counter sale of marijuana.

### The Tolerant Nation

The debate over the headscarf has arisen in numerous countries across Europe, including but not limited to France, Belgium, Austria, Germany and Denmark. Clearly, there are common trends and

roots that span each national context, yet, at the same time, there are also differences that make each situation distinct. The Netherlands, with its large Muslim community and long tradition of tolerance, offers a unique case study for analyzing the politicization of the headscarf and its relationship to the multiculturalism debate.

The Netherlands is hailed by many as the “world’s most tolerant nation.” It was the first country to open marriage to the same sex couples, regulate prostitution, approve and control euthanasia and allow the over-the-counter sale of marijuana. According to Professor Rosi Braidotti, Director of Research in Women’s Studies of the University of Utrecht, “Because of its mainly protestant roots, the Dutch generally believe that if you leave a human being to himself that he will be a good person.” As such, the Dutch tendency to “live and let live” is deeply rooted in the nation’s history and culture. Moreover, the Netherlands does not have the history of strong ethno-nationalism that has characterized countries such as Germany and Denmark. As Rinus Penninx, a Dutch politician puts it, “Even though most of the characteristics of the nation-state are present in Dutch society, its ideological backup in terms of claims of unity and homogeneity in the language and culture of Dutch people has been far less pronounced than in other countries.” Furthermore, the Dutch system of polarization in which the Catholics, Protestants and Socialists created their own respective organizational networks allowed for a long history of cultural variation in Dutch society (not just of religion, but region, class, urban/rural as well). All of these factors—its history of tolerance, inclusive nationalism, and cultural variation—combined in the past to create a more benign and accepting environment for immigrants than in many other European nations.

As such, though the period up until the late 1990s did witness a debate over multiculturalism and Islam in the Netherlands, it was rarely as heated or divisive as it was in other European nations. After successive waves of immigration throughout the period of 1940s, to the ‘80s, a group of Muslims, mainly from Turkey and Morocco, settled down to work and raise families. Dutch intensive industries in 1960 needed workers, and Morocco and Turkey had plenty of those, ready and cheap.

One might predict that if a multicultural society could work anywhere, it would be here in the Netherlands.

In a sense, there is some truth to this prediction.

These guest workers were expected to leave. Now, and as a result of a long recruitment period, family reunion, new marriage and birth, this category represents the main Islamic minority group. In the 1990s, refugees from Islamic countries like Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan have also settled in the Netherlands. The Netherlands made proactive efforts to include and welcome new immigrants into Dutch society. In the Minorities Bill of 1983, a multicultural and pluralistic society is envisaged, one in which immigrants would have the “same rights and opportunities to practice and develop their own cultural and religious identity as do other groups in Dutch society.” As part of this bill, the government set out to, among other things, strengthen immigrant communities, stimulate their political participation, and facilitate their religious activities.

One might predict that if a multicultural society could work anywhere, it would be here in the Netherlands. In a sense, there is some truth to this prediction. The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed very little overt tension or conflict over multicultural issues, particularly when compared to other European nations. Though the Netherlands was not a perfectly integrated, non-racist utopia, its citizens pretty much left each other alone, which in general allowed for a relatively workable multicultural society. As such, the Muslim woman and her headscarf were not only left untouched, the issue was simply not even on the table.

#### September 11 and the Shift in Political Discourse

So what changed? What was it that pushed this tolerant nation into a fierce and at times violent debate about multiculturalism and particularly about Islam? There were some early warning signs throughout the mid- and late 1990s. National debates



Street scene in Brussels, Belgium. Photo by Merouane Touali.

on minority policy, immigration and illegal migrants began to garner greater attention. An increasingly unfriendly climate towards asylum seekers and foreigners across Europe gave strength to anti-immigrant parties in the Netherlands. Though these parties did not present any major threat, there were signs throughout the Netherlands in the late 1990s, in particular, that impatience and frustration with multi-

Though there was clearly some dissatisfaction and even anger boiling underneath the surface of Dutch society throughout the 1990s, it was the dramatic shift in political discourse that occurred following the terrorist attacks of September 11 that brought the “problem of Islam” within the Netherlands to the forefront.

culturalism were on the rise. For example, in its 1999 and 2000 annual reports, the National Bureau Against Racial Discrimination drew attention to the “frustrations as to tolerance and the multicultural society” and “the eagerness with which the public and the media complain about aspects of the multicultural society.”

Though there was clearly some dissatisfaction and even anger boiling underneath the surface of Dutch society throughout the 1990s, it was the dramatic shift in political discourse that occurred following the terrorist attacks of September 11 that brought the “problem of Islam” within the Netherlands to the forefront. According to Mr. Halim El Madkouri, the Director of the Program for Religion and Identity at FORUM (The institute for Multicultural Development), “It was the terrorist attacks of September 11 that opened the door in the Netherlands for both the attack on Islam and the headscarf.” All of a sudden, this “hyper-tolerant” society began to witness a rising tide of racism and discrimination against Muslims and the emergence of a public debate over the merits (and demerits) of a multicultural society. Many prominent politicians and scholars across the political spectrum began to attack the concept of a multicultural society and argue for dramatic changes in the country’s policies towards immigrants and

refugees. Much of this debate was directed at Islam and the effect that the presence of Islam was having on Dutch society. As Rod Dreher from the *National Review* puts it, "If not for the Islamist terrorist attacks, the fear and loathing many Dutch people have concerning the presence of Muslims in their country would not have been aired in Holland's ultra politically correct public square." The Dutch right wing took full advantage of this political climate and escalated attacks on Islam and multiculturalism. At the head of this right wing assault was the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn.

Fortuyn came to prominence in large part by persuading voters that the secular West was in the midst of a clash of civilizations with intolerant Islam. Among other things, Fortuyn called for the ending of Muslim immigration and the forced assimilation of Dutch minorities. Fortuyn's rhetoric about the backwardness of Islam and the superiority of Western culture was not new, but it took a peculiar form within the Dutch context of "uber-tolerance."

A statement of a Moroccan imam portraying homosexuality as an illness and homosexuals as pigs was used by Pim Fortuyn to validate his notion that Islam is not a tolerant religion and cannot coexist with modern Dutch values. Fortuyn presented his argument firmly in the language of Dutch tolerance. "How can we tolerate Muslims, when they don't accept our liberal values of tolerating everybody?" asked Fortuyn. Yet as Professor Braidotti puts it, "There was a fundamental paradox in Fortuyn's rhetoric that many Dutch did not seem to catch: he was using Dutch tolerance as a justification to be intolerant against Muslims." In any case, before his assassination by a nature activist two weeks before the Dutch parliament elections, Fortuyn gained widespread popularity and put the "debate over Islam" on center stage.

It was in this context that the politicization of the headscarf in the Netherlands occurred. As Muslim journalist Samira Abous put it, "The headscarf was simply not a political issue within wider Dutch society before September 11th." September 11 and Pim Fortuyn pushed the Dutch population towards questioning the entire multicultural project. The result is a new political discourse in the Netherlands in which certain cultures and

## Fortuyn's rhetoric about the backwardness of Islam and the superiority of Western culture was not new, but it took a peculiar form within the Dutch context of "uber-tolerance."

cultural practices could be questioned as well. The "live and let live" attitude towards minorities has been fundamentally altered. A new discourse has emerged: If "they" do not accept "our" values, then "they" cannot be a part of "our" society. Whether or not one believes that Dutch society's questioning of the headscarf is justified, one cannot deny that it was this shift in political discourse that made it possible within the Dutch context.

### **Orientalism and the Role of Muslim Women**

In order to fully understand today's debate within the Netherlands over the headscarf, it is essential to reach back and look at the relationship between Islam and the West historically. For hundreds of years, the West has utilized a distinct paradigm or discourse known as Orientalism (the representation of the East, including Islam,

from a Western perspective). Under this paradigm, a binary is created in which the superior West and the inferior East are diametrically opposed. Where the West is inherently rational, secular, tolerant, democratic and respectful of women's rights, the East is inherently irrational, fundamentalist, intolerant, undemocratic and oppressive against women. In this dichotomy the East is portrayed as wholly uniform and unchanging, leaving the acceptance of Western culture as the only way to progress and modernize. As a system of knowledge, Orientalism provided the ideological tools through which the West could "dominate, restructure and have authority over the Orient." As such, throughout the colonial period and even throughout most of the 20th century, the West's knowledge of Islam and the Arab world was filtered through this Orientalist lens and dominated by its systems of language and representation.

The Muslim woman has always been central to the Orientalist discourse and thus to the West's knowledge of the East (and Islam). In Orientalist discourse, the Muslim woman is portrayed as the oppressed, silent victim of Islamic patriarchy, and this image is presented as the single, encompassing truth about the reality of Muslim women's lives that spans generations, cultures and countries.





Moroccan windows, watercolor, by Tania Beaumont

The Muslim woman is treated not as a subject with agency of her own, but rather an object dominated and controlled by an oppressive Islam. Thus, the West's mission to liberate the Muslim world from its "backwardness" has often focused mainly on Muslim women. Furthermore, insofar as the veil represents the position of women within the Muslim world, lifting the veil has come to represent the liberation not only of these women but also of the entire culture from its "backwardness." As Meyda Yegenoglu puts it in her book *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, "The association between the Orient and its women, or specifically the representation of the woman as the essence of the Orient, made it all the more important to lift the veil, for unveiling and thereby modernizing the woman of the Orient signified the transformation of the Orient itself."

It is important to understand Orientalism and its discourse on the veil in order to contextualize today's debate over the veil here in the Netherlands and across Europe. What we quickly learn is that today's debate is not entirely new, but rather, in many ways, simply a continuation of the age-old debate in a new context. Though Orientalism refers to the West's historical discourse on the Orient, the language and images of Orientalism continue to dominate today's political discussions on Islam and multiculturalism in Europe. Skewed Orientalist assumptions still form the basis for much of our "knowledge" about Islam, and this "knowledge" is reflected in contemporary politics. Yet within today's debate, which deals with intra-society rather inter-society issues, the veil and unveiling take on new roles related to assimilation and nationalism, which must also be addressed on their own terms.

## Contemporary Debate over the Headscarf in the Netherlands

The Muslim woman's body has once again become the battleground for a fierce political debate. Before, the debate was over the right of Western societies to colonize the Arab world to free women from the patriarchal culture, but today it is about the right of Muslims to exist within Western societies. Yet many of the past assumptions and ideological foundations remain constant. Again, there is an assumption that Muslim women cannot make individual decisions for themselves, but rather have to be saved by an outside culture. As Pim Fortuyn put it, "Muslim culture has absolutely no respect for women." Fortuyn's declarations that Islam is inherently "backward" and "oppressive towards women" are nothing new.

According to Professor Braidotti, Fortuyn offered a very familiar paradigm in which a person can either be "developed" or be "Muslim," but cannot be both. As was the case for Western colonialists and even many "feminists" in the past, for Pim Fortuyn, Hirshi Ali--a former Muslim and one of the most fervent political opponents of Islam--and other prominent politicians in the Netherlands, removing the veil can symbolize the woman's rejection of the old traditions and liberation from this "backward" culture. To be fair, some of today's arguments against the veil are rooted less in overt Islamophobia or racism, and more in a strong belief in the superiority of the Western conception of women's emancipation. In any case, there remains a thoroughly Orientalist notion that runs through such arguments which posits the West's way of doing things as the only way and all others as inherently unacceptable. Yet today, in the context of the multiculturalism debate, the veil is often politicized in a way that in fact has very little to do with Islam itself.

A new discourse has emerged: If "they" do not accept "our" values, then "they" cannot be a part of "our" society. Whether or not one believes that Dutch society's questioning of the headscarf is justified, one cannot deny that it was this shift in political discourse that made it possible within the Dutch context.

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The veil is the most visible expression of difference within contemporary Dutch society. For that reason, to challenge the existence of overt difference has often meant to challenge the veil itself. For many people the veil is less about Islam and its “backwardness” or “oppression of women,” and more about difference. Those who fear multiculturalism are those who fear the effect that difference will have on one’s society. In his article “Discomfort of Strangers,” David Goodhart helps us understand such views. Goodhart argues that “visible ethnic diversity” constantly reminds people that there are “strangers” in their midst that may or may not share their same values and interests. This often causes people to lash out against visible signs of diversity, often unjustifiably. Whether or not these fears or justified, the veil has in many ways come to symbolize this overt existence of difference within modern Dutch society.

### The Effects of Politicization

Whether it is driven by a crusade against Muslim “backwardness” or simply a fear of difference in modern Dutch society (or some combination of the two), it is undeniable that the headscarf has become a political issue. The mass media and prominent politicians across the political spectrum have opened up the “debate over the headscarf.” It is rare to open up a newspaper on any given day in the Netherlands and not see an article pertaining in some way to this issue.

Though some have called for the headscarf to be banned across the board or in the entire service sector (restaurants, hotels, hospitals), most of the questions being raised are related to the right of courts, schools, and other state institutions to deny women who wear the headscarf. While the state still takes a relatively “hands-off” approach to such issues by allowing individual schools and institu-

Another philosopher F.A Muller called the veil the “swastika of Islamic fundamentalism” and declared that such “ideological symbols” should not be allowed in the courtroom.

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tions to make their own decisions, it has recently ignored cases of overt discrimination in ways that at the very least allow and may even condone such practices.



*Asilah window, monotype and watercolor, by Tania Beaumont*

For example, a Muslim woman named Ayse Tabakatepe was denied a job as a court clerk after being told outright that the reason was because her headscarf “violated the neutrality of the court.” In response to this case, law philosopher and public intellectual Paul Cliteur stated that “the veil is against the concept of neutrality and against the soul of autonomy of justice.” Another philosopher, F.A Muller, called the veil the “swastika of Islamic fundamentalism” and declared that such “ideological symbols” should not be allowed in the courtroom. In another case, a court declared that a religious high school in Rotterdam has the right to deny girls who wear the veil. The Schools Inspectorate refuses to tackle such prohibitions and the Ministry of Education, too, feels that such

prohibitions in religious schools are acceptable. Though the Netherlands has by no means gone the way of France (which banned headscarves in all public schools), since September 11 it has indeed begun to chip away at the right to wear the headscarf in certain areas and looks as though it will continue to do so.

The politicization of the headscarf has had profound effects on the lives of Muslim women themselves, irrespective of changes in public policy. According to the National Bureau Against Racial Discrimination (LBR), Muslims who wear headscarves are regularly discriminated against and “face prohibition of scarves in the educational field and in the labor market.” These prohibitions, according to LBR, are contrary to Dutch legislation, but are largely ignored by government agencies in charge of enforcing such legislation. Samia, a newly converted Dutch Muslim, describes how “society shuts the door on people who wear the veil” and sees them as “strange” and “dangerous.” Samia’s views are shared by Samira Abbos, the Moroccan journalist, who says: “Veils prevent women from integrating due to society’s reaction to their veil and their resulting inability to find work.”

Such discrimination on the basis of the headscarf has only become a major issue in the Netherlands since September 11 and Pim Fortuyn. It is quite clear that for the media, politicians, employers, and regular Dutch citizens, the headscarf means something different than it once did. The politicization of the veil as a symbol of oppression, backwardness and difference has permeated every day society, thereby making things much more difficult for veiled women.

Muslim women also play a major role in the political discourse over the veil, albeit a lesser one than they should. According to Sawarti Saharso, a teacher at the University of Rotterdam and member of E-Quality, “Many Muslim women have spoken out against attacks on the veil and many have even joined organizations that help advocate for women who choose to

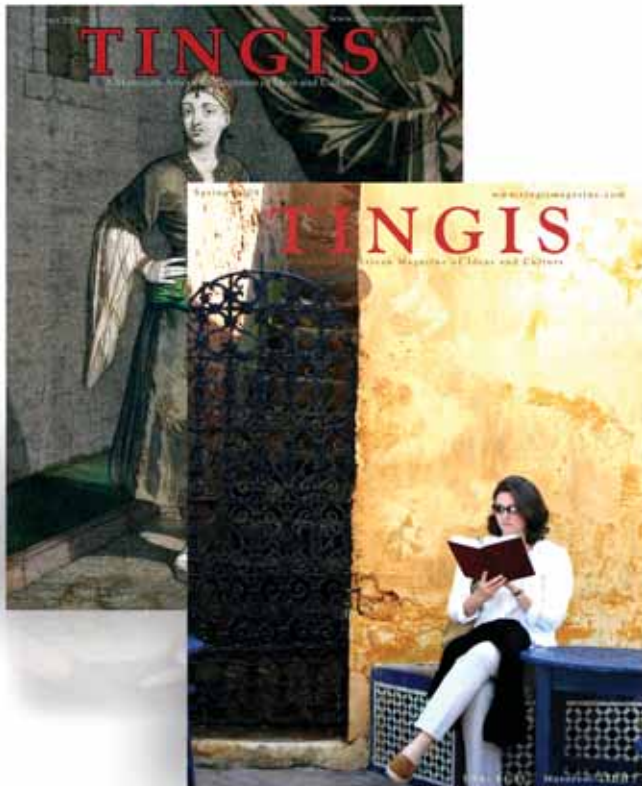
The Netherlands remains a very tolerant nation, one that affords its citizens an unparalleled level of personal freedom. Finding ways to extend this tradition of freedom and acceptance not only to Muslim women but to all immigrants will be the key to the Netherlands' success as a multicultural society.

wear the veil." "Islam and Citizenship," "My Veil and I," "Nissa" are three such organizations, and all three have created

websites that publicize their cause. The politicization of the veil has created the space for Muslim women to speak out not only about their choice to wear the veil, but also about their identities as Muslim women. According to Mr. Halim El Madkouri from FORUM, "It is a pity that the issue [headscarf] has become political, but it is good because it gives the opportunity for Muslims to make their own statements." For some Muslim women, the veil itself has even become a political statement where it may not have been before. As the wider Dutch society begins to question the veil, some Muslim women who previously did not wear the veil are putting it on as an assertion of their Muslim identity and their right to display this identity in a free society.

Over the past few years within the Netherlands, the veil has exited the realm of the religious and the personal and entered the realm of the socio-political.

This politicization of the veil can only be understood in the context of Orientalist discourse and the rise of anti-Islamic and anti-multicultural sentiment following September 11. The politicization of the veil is unfortunate, not only because the veil is not a socio-political issue but rather a religious choice, but also because Muslim women have had to suffer the consequences of this debate raging over their heads. A dramatic rise in discrimination and the presence of widespread hostility towards veiled women has been the result. Certainly a discussion about women's rights within Islamic culture is valid, but it should take place only in a context that allows for individuals to exercise their religious freedom, not when an entire religion is being demonized. Above all, it is essential that we move away from dwelling on the object, the headscarf, while all the time ignoring the subject, the woman herself. Muslim women who wear the headscarf do not feel welcome or comfortable in Dutch



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society. Those who want to help these women should look first to that fact rather than to the veil itself.

Unfortunately, Orientalist discourse, the attacks of September 11, and the rise of the right wing in the Netherlands cannot be erased from history. Yet, at the same time, neither can we erase the Dutch history of tolerance or Dutch society's early successes with cultural diversity and multiculturalism. One can only hope that within the latter there are the tools with which to challenge the rise of intolerance and discrimination that have taken hold in the Netherlands over the past few years. The Netherlands remains a very tolerant nation, one that affords its citizens an unparalleled level of personal freedom. Finding ways to extend this tradition of freedom and acceptance not only to Muslim women but to all immigrants will be the key to the Netherlands' success as a multicultural society.

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# How Mr. Hammou Became a Fundamentalist

By  
*Mustapha Hamil*

**T**he Arabic expression Islamic *umma*, broadly meaning community or *nation*, refers to a broad and undefined concept which offers Muslims all over the world a useful notion of belonging, albeit emotionally, to a definite religious (and sometimes political) entity. In its political formulation through the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the *umma* emerges as an imagined community—imagined as both autonomous and homogeneous. The attributes of the *umma*—a cultural or fantasized—correlate, to some extent, to Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as "an imagined political community."

The 55 or so countries that recognize themselves as part of the Organization of the Islamic Conference are as geographically distant from each other as they are culturally and socially heterogeneous. These countries may share Islam as the official religion of the state, but they definitely have little or nothing in common in terms of social and political structures, popular observance of religious rituals or even in terms of the official implementation and execution of the Koranic law. For example, Muslims in North Africa hardly know anything of their fellow "brothers" and "sisters" in Indonesia or Malaysia. Yet in the minds of each lives the idea of belonging to a broad and borderless Muslim community. Self-identification as Muslim—within each Muslim's mind—supersedes the sovereignty of the nation and overrides localized linguistic and ethnic identity markers.

Islam offers a plethora of rituals and symbols that all Muslims recognize and identify with. Reinforcement of these rituals and symbols—either through social osmosis, family education, state sponsorship, or organized religious instruction—helps create a narrative of belonging to the same community. The assumption that the Islamic *umma*, notwithstanding its territorial instability, is a homogeneous commu-

nity adds to the false notion of its existence as a sovereign political entity. Yet the question remains: how can such a formless notion of *umma* cause so many Muslims to believe in its power as a global political force and to be predisposed to die for it? There are of course many possible answers to this question, but for the sake of concision and in order to avoid superfluous generalizations, I will look at only one particular issue: the crisis of identification in the Arab world and, more particularly, in the Maghreb.

During the colonial period, religion played a crucial role in the struggle against Western colonial powers. It presented itself as a popular force of resistance and a mobilizing ideology in the face of a foreign—often dubbed Christian—threat to Islam. In a sense, colonialism triggered a collective awareness of identity and a political sense of responsibility to defend its cultural authenticity. Before the encounter with the West, Muslims did not need to reflect on their identity nor did they have to define themselves in opposition to something other than themselves. In the context of colonialism, identity politics offered nationalist movements a useful ideology to unite all segments of society around the political goal of independence. Despite their secular language and rhetoric, most Arab nationalist movements were strongly informed by a conservative ideology. They looked at the present from within the prism of tradition. The religious component of popular resistance legitimized and sustained the long struggle for political sovereignty.

Compared to the colonial period, political practice in the post-independence era seems to be meaningless, devoid of intrinsic value, detached from the people, and powerless in the face of foreign challenges. In North Africa, for example, French colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization have disrupted the coherent and habitual picture of people's reality;

they have distorted the region's past and tradition have imposed, in their place, a patchwork of incongruous Western cultures and ideologies, or simply invented new ones. In either case, the result is the fragmentation of Maghrebian reality that, in turn, reflects conflicting perceptions of identity and of the world. Let's consider two areas where this fragmentation is more visible: culture and politics.

The Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) lacks a popular language that expresses a total and unified thought and vision of reality. The people speak different dialects and neither Arabic nor French, the two main written languages, has helped the creation of an intellectual life reflective of the heterogeneous culture of the region. French and Arabic, which every Arab or Berber native learns in school, are in total disconnect with Maghrebian everyday life. Educated people, intellectuals, politicians and writers speak an Arabic that the rest of society can hardly understand. As a result, we have a situation where those who are in a position to enlighten, educate, reform, and lead the general public (though not in the Marxist sense) end up speaking to or among themselves. French remains the privilege of the few and thus continues to be perceived by the rest of society as the language of progress, modernity, and social mobility. The failure of arabization that the three countries launched immediately after independence and the precarious reforms of the system of education have brought about a generalized situation of bilingual illiteracy. Mastering neither Arabic nor French, postcolonial North Africans seem to be floundering in a quandary of linguistic and cultural uncertainties.

There is something paradoxical in this situation: religious fundamentalists have emerged in recent years as vehement defenders of the political and cultural sovereignty of Arab-Islamic identity. They

The assumption that the Islamic *umma*, notwithstanding its territorial instability, is a homogeneous community adds to the false notion of its existence as a sovereign political entity.

have successfully capitalized on the failure of postcolonial governments to fulfill their promises. According to them, Maghrebien societies have reached a point of moral and cultural degeneracy that requires a more radical change. Unlike the nationalists who were/are mostly motivated by an elitist bourgeois ideology, the fundamentalists use the language of the people and appeal to their most sacred conviction: their religiosity. Adapting and adopting a variety of oral and written means of communication and persuasion, they even seem to impose their discourse on the

intellectual scene in North Africa. This is not hard to explain. The cultural and political motivation that animates their action goes beyond the concerns of Francophone and Arabophone intellectuals. Ironically enough, the most popular “intellectuals” among ordinary people are not Abdelkebir Khatibi or Kateb Yacine but Sheikh Yacine or Abbas Madani, and other less notorious *imams*.

On the political level, postcolonial Arab regimes have adopted strict, sometimes brutal measures to suppress all forms of dissent, thus creating a void between a corrupt political and military elite and the rest of the people. The repeated defeats in the wars with Israel and the mediated humiliation of the Gulf wars have created among ordinary people a sentiment of mortification and powerlessness. In order to prove to the world and to their people that they still exercise some form of authority and power, Arab leaders have turned against their own subjects. It is quite worrisome to see how Arab regimes have developed certain fixations on the vertical dimension of power as a strategic

diversion from their horizontal/transnational defeat. By so doing, they have eroded people's emotional ties and obligations to their nation. The more they oppress their people, the less popular they become, and the more the idea of belonging to a nation—fragile as it has always been—loses its appeal among ordinary citizens.

Mastering neither Arabic nor French, postcolonial North Africans seem to be floundering in a quandary of linguistic and cultural uncertainties.

The idea of the nation as the Arab world discovered it has a shifting and unstable significance within Arab political discourse. Arab leaders have arrogated for themselves the power to define national character and have systematically subvert-





ed the process of recapturing collective memories by rewriting their personal stories in the guise of the collective history of their nation. The portraits of leaders that everywhere dominate public and governmental spaces impose the cult of personal-

Ironically enough, the most popular “intellectuals” among ordinary people are not Abdelkebir Khatibi or Kateb Yacine but Sheikh Yacine or Abbas Madani, and other less notorious *imams*.

ity whereby leaders stand just a step beneath God.

There are many other examples of Arab leaders’ attempts to forge and impose their self-centered vision on their people. The disparity between official versions of national history and the people’s collective memory has engendered a general sense of betrayal. The invented unity among the different ethnic and linguistic groups within the *nation* has, paradoxically, awakened ethnic and linguistic consciousness. This raises the as to what impact that ethnic and linguistic awareness has in “nation-building” or “nation-destroying.”

The appropriation of religion by most Arab regimes and their manipulation of the spiritual authority of religious institutions

such as *al-azhar* in Egypt or *majliss a-shoura* in Saudi Arabia have angered both the moderate and conservative religious groups who see in this collaboration a

He searched deep inside himself for some kind of comfort and strength and what he found confounded him: layer upon layer of unfinished identities, scraps and sounds of learned and unlearned languages, broken promises and impossible dreams.

betrayal of the leader's religious and political duties towards his subjects. Islamists have, as a consequence, turned against both Arab leadership and their attendant clerics. And since political dissent is almost non-existent, young moderate Arabs tend to sympathize—although in silence—with the Islamists for the simple reason that they are able to challenge the authority of local and global power authorities.

Ethnic dissatisfaction with official definitions of identity has reached its apogee in the last decades, benefiting from the universal calls for minority rights. Heightened ethnic sentiments have created a situation whereby the very notion of *nation* has become problematic, indeed, meaningless. The alternative, therefore, to empty narratives of nationalism, modernity, and democracy is the mesmerizing slogan: "Islam is the way." From an identity point of view, Islam(ism) offers disoriented individuals a certain sense of belonging to a community whose universal values of justice and human dignity transcend the incongruity of territorial or pan-Arab nationalism. This may explain why an ethnic minority has more affinities with the Muslim community than with other member of the same state. The example of the Palestinian authority is an interesting one. Most Muslims sympathize with Hamas but not with the Palestinian Nationalist Movement. Sympathy here is based more on religious sentiment than on mere nationalism. From a social point of view, fundamentalists have succeeded there where governments and their attendant intellectuals and clerics have failed: among the poor and the illiterate. Islamic cultural organizations and charities have helped to win both admiration and loyalty for Islamist leaders and views. On a more international level, Islamism embraces the unresolved issues of Palestine and Iraq, and other causes where Islam is involved and opposes U.S. double standard policies in order to justify its ideology.

It is common lore that when a society shows signs of uncertainty and doubt, people usually seek refuge in their past tradition and myths. For an average Moroccan or Algerian the likelihood of becoming conservative or even extremist is very high. Let me for the occasion mention the example of Mr. Hammou, a native of Azrou, Morocco. Born to a Berber family,

Pseudo-experts on Islam and hired pundits on terrorism pigeonhole Mr. Hammou, the native son of Azrou, against his will, within air-tight stereotypical constructs that have very little to do with his reality.

Mr. Hammou had his first encounter with the Arabic alphabet in the *msid*—or Koranic school. At seven he went to the elementary school where he learned Arabic and then French. In high school he chose English as his second foreign language. Mr. Hammou graduated from the University of Fez with a degree in English Literature. He was a passionate reader of Wordsworth and Shelley. Since he could not find a governmental job, he decided, against his will, to join the army of unofficial tourist guides in the city of Fez. After some years in the job and some disconcerting experiences with his colleagues, Mr. Hammou started to doubt his call as a tourist guide, especially since he had to entertain the whims—sometimes inappropriate ones—of affluent American and British tourists. He searched deep inside himself for some kind of comfort and strength and what he found confounded him: layer upon layer of unfinished identities, scraps and sounds of learned and unlearned languages, broken promises and impossible dreams. There was one thing, however, that was still shining in the midst of his doubts and uncertainties: his faith. A young Berber from Azrou, speaking Moroccan Arabic to a fat Fassi *bazaarist*, summarizing the conversation in English to a white American woman from Georgia, filling out forms in French in the Post Office, reading *al-fatiha*, the opening verses of the Koran, five times a day in classical Arabic, Mr. Hammou felt his life was gradually turning into a bag of ready-made formulas that had no value other than mundane social transactions. He wanted to feel that he belonged to a community—linguistic or otherwise—that he could call his. Overnight Mr. Hammou became very serious about his religion. In the company of other zealots, he felt totally at home.

In search of some sort of identification with something more inclusive and more tolerant to their differences, Mr. Hammou, like many other North Africans, finds emotional fulfillment in belonging to the small community congregating five times a day

in the small mosque in downtown Fez. As time went by, Mr. Hammou became convinced that his small community of devout Muslims, despite the differences in dialect and social status, belongs to the larger community of the Islamic *umma*, albeit its imaginary and formless character. The link between Mr. Hammou's small community and the larger *umma*, between the local and the global, the personal and the communal, in this new configuration of self-identification are the religious clerics. Using the everyday language that he knows, spiced up with a revolutionary rhetoric, the religious clerics propose to assemble the fragments of his identity—and that of his country—and to construct a meaning of life the political and intellectual elites can't produce themselves—a meaning that provides a hopeful vision of the future.



Presenting local issues as part and parcel of the global concerns of the *umma*—or connecting the vertical with the horizontal—places the individual—regardless of their linguistic, ethnic or social background—in the larger context of the *umma*, which in this case, should be understood as the fluid realm where the interests of one individual like Mr. Hammou or one country assume global significance. Where political leaders strive to consolidate the vertical dimension of the nation, the ideologues of the Islamic *umma* insist on the horizontal or global dimension of the *umma*. The porous realm of the *umma* transcends national boundaries and is today being imagined as a visible mirror held back to the West and to its Arab protégés and on which local grievances and dreams of ordinary people are publicly projected.

The *imam* explains to his new disciple that Islam advocates both socialism and democracy and that during the times of the

Prophet, the constitution of Medina, based on the Koranic principle of *shoura*, gave voice to all social classes, tribes and languages. "Any Muslim," the *imam* goes on, "can be elected as a Caliph regardless of his ethnic affiliation or social status." But the *imam* intentionally glossed over the assassination of the fourth caliph, Ali ibnu Abi Talib, by Mu'awiyya ibnu Abi Suffyan, an event that laid the principle of *shoura* to rest. Mu'awiyya's illegitimate confiscation of political power has become the trend in modern Arab history.

Mr. Hammou leaves the mosque with some troubling thoughts. "If religion and politics seem to go together, why does the *imam* denigrate our current political leaders?" It is true that Arab regimes, most of whom identify themselves as modern and moderate, depend on religious institutions as a seal of political legitimacy. In his book, *Modern Trends in Islam*, Hamilton Gibb argues that as long as the ulema or religious clerics do not initiate a reformist movement, Islam will always remain in a permanent state of decline. From a strictly theological perspective, Gibb is right; the West had its Reformation while the Muslim world is still waiting for its own. From a political standpoint, Gibb is totally wrong in thinking that the ulema form an independent social class that enjoys a distinct sphere of influence on the social and political reality of the Muslim community. Since the time of Mohammed (A.D. 570–632), political rulers, emperors, monarchs, and regional governors have constantly used Islam as a religious establishment that legitimates their authority and rule. Postcolonial Arab regimes need semi-independent religious institutions—such as *al-azhar* in Egypt or *majliss a-shoura* in Saudi Arabia—as referential authorities on matters of theology. But the more these governments and their attendant clerics connive to oppress their people in the name of religion, the more those discontented with their political leaders turn against official clerics as well.

Given that most Arab leaders are more concerned about their immediate political privileges, the clerics or *imams* have gradually invested the global arena—aided in that by modern information technology—and have thus arrogated the imagined space of the *umma* for themselves by inscribing their ideas—conservative or extremist—in the narrative of the



*umma* in the guise of collective memory and shared destiny. The appeal of this narrative to young Arabs or Berbers is not hard to explain. Disillusioned by the meager achievements of political independence, betrayed by their rulers who strike unpopular alliances with the West in order to protect their power, and conscious of human rights abuses within their countries, the Arab angry generations have turned their anger and frustration into weapons to challenge, indeed to destroy the symbols and icons that remind them of their marginality and insignificance.

Since on the vertical (national) level Arab governments have shut off all channels of political dissent and intellectual difference, these angry generations have turned to the imaginary *umma* in order to voice their rage and, by the same token, to satisfy their need for world recognition as oppressed people. Initially, discourses and activities of the fundamentalists have targeted local configurations of power. They have either sought direct confrontation as in the case of Algeria or peaceful transformation of the political scene through participation in the democratic process as in the case of Morocco. In both cases, the objective is one: the establishment of a religious state.

Adapting modern technology to their needs, radical fundamentalists have transcended conventional borders and directed their anger against Western sponsors of illegitimate regimes, especially the United States. Pseudo-experts on Islam and hired

pundits on terrorism pigeonhole Mr. Hammou, the native son of Azrou, against his will, within air-tight stereotypical constructs that have very little to do with his reality. Such stereotypes assume, falsely, that one Arab or one Muslim individual—regardless of education, background, or political orientation—can always, and does indeed, recapture the passions, views and intentions of his/her people since his/her own individual life is always emblematic of his/her group. Such intellectual laziness on the part of Western media, especially in the United States, favors broad generalizations that sanction all sorts of inaccurate representations. Nobody seems to be concerned about the role of ethnic languages, localized histories, and the political cultures of dictatorship and oppression in forging identities and worldviews.

Within the Arab and Islamic worlds, the illusion of belonging to a homogeneous entity—whether Arab or Muslim—still shapes the way people connect with the rest of the world. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a landmark in the way Arabs view the West, especially the United States. To pretend that this issue does not bear any emotional or political significance for Arabs and Muslims confirms ordinary people's general sentiment of mistrust of the West and its new-fangled *mission civilisatrice*. On the other hand, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offers Arab regimes a convenient scapegoat; not only is the conflict held responsible for all the malaises and ills of society, it also pro-



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vides a reason for dreaming of a more combative Islamic *umma* despite its historical anachronism.

Islamic history has shown that the *umma* is not so much a physical entity as a mere projection of its members, a mental structure that keeps mapping and re-mapping itself; indeed as something whose shape or shapelessness can be manipulated at leisure by political or religious leaders. Arab regimes seem to condone and, sometimes, even encourage such identification with the larger community of the *umma*. And for good practical reasons. Identification with the imagined global community of Muslims may suspend demands for political recognition that leads ethnic groups (minorities in some cases) to question the validity of official definitions of identity. In other words, identification with a larger community reduces ethnic and national consciousness. This, in turn, leads to the invention of an imagined community whose adherents may share common sympathies that do not exist between them and others who live within the same political entity.

The religious dream of recovering the great Islamic *umma* has the potential of destroying that which it intends to restore, in that it will expedite the breakdown of

The popularized argument that the miserable socio-economic and political reality of the postcolonial period can be blamed on the West only is at once misleading and defeatist.

independent political entities, with the potential of undoing the whole construct that we have come to know as the Arab world. It is no exaggeration to say that religious fundamentalists, because of their blindness to world history and politics, are depriving individual countries of the possibility and hope of forming strong regional economic and political alliances.



In recent years, ethnic and linguistic consciousness is subsumed as a political force in the imagined community of a greater Muslim community. People no longer con-

test the reality of political and economic oppression. Their attention is now diverted to the cultural and military hegemony of the U.S. The popularized argument that the miserable socio-economic and political reality of the postcolonial period can be blamed on the West only is at once misleading and defeatist. It is in this sense that religious discourse on national and international affairs—no matter how it presents itself—challenges the instability of the foundation of the nation—most often described as a secular bastard entity. For the staunch defenders of fundamentalist ideas, the breakdown of the nation paves the way for the realization of the imagined community of a powerful Islamic *umma*. One may wonder why such an ideal finds support among educated people at a time when one may think that the era of religious obscurantism is long gone. Religious discourse proposes itself, in the absence of a more viable political alternative, as the only narrative of liberation from the yoke of local despotic regimes, as well as the only force capable of confronting global cultural and military aggression. Given the reality of political weakness of Arab governments and the generalized sense of Arab humiliation, religious discourse offers “Islam” as the answer, and thus challenges the political and religious legitimacy of Arab nations.





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Religious discourse also questions the official constructs of Arab-Islamic identities. If one accepts Ernest Renan's idea that the nation is "a soul, a spiritual principle" guided by two things, "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; and the present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form," then one can understand that religious discourse expresses popular frustration with official narratives of identity. Arab regimes have hijacked their nation's independence, marginalized ethnic identities as well as ethnic languages, appropriated national discourses, and selectively suppressed memories, which otherwise would lead to questions about their legitimacy. As they distort a common past, they make it impossible to build a common future. Breaking down national boundaries as such allows for a new configuration and forces a remapping of the terrain. It also paves the way for the creation of alternative groupings to the mess that exists today. Making the boundaries of these nations fluid may indeed be the initial step towards responding to the question of whether the Islamists' dream of more than fifteen centuries ago can ever be realized.

I am confident that dream will not be realized in Mr. Hammou's lifetime.

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# To Burn

By  
Mark MacNamara

**T**he “clandestine” immigrants moving through the Maghreb into southern Europe these days are often referred to as *harraga*. The word, sometimes meaning “adventurers” is Arabic slang thrown on refugees from all over Africa. In that sense, *harraga* are the bone and blood barometer of economic weather from Darfur to Abidjan and from Cape Town to towns all along the southern lip of the Mediterranean.

The *harraga* moving through Morocco from the sub-Sahara can be divided into two groups—poorer and poorest. Those with some cash may share a *grand taxi* up the N1 to hidden refuges in the hills around Tangier, where they wait to make a connection and catch a *patera*, one of the zodiacs which, depending upon moon and tides, ferry 40 people or more up to Spain. Lately, people have been stopping far to the south in Morocco, around Tarfaya, and catching the *pateras* that scurry over to the Canary Islands. It's a highly dangerous trip.

Other “clandestines” riding up the Moroccan coast attach themselves to vehicles however they can find. There are stories of young men riding on top of trains or in the undercarriages of busses, or lying on cardboard strips atop truck engines. The less daring, and with fewer resources, turn east at Bou-lzakarn and follow the N12, riding and walking, getting a hitch from one *marché* to another, skirting the desert up to the Ziz River, then north through Erfoud and Missour. Or else they cross over into Algeria, going up to Bechar, and then due north to Oujda. Whichever way they come along this inland route, the goal is to reach the camps in the hills around Melilla, where the “clandestines” make periodic attempts to scramble up crude ladders and hop over the high fences around the town.

In that sense, *harraga* are the bone and blood barometer of economic weather from Darfur to Abidjan and from Cape Town to towns all along the southern lip of the Mediterranean.

From time to time these camps are raided. Government police make a show: burn shacks and belongings, round up who they can, truck them to the Algerian border and dump them off. Most return to Morocco, forever unwilling to give up their journey and oblivious to the increasing political pressure Southern Europe is putting on the Maghreb to keep a lid on Africa's cauldron of unemployed.

Nowhere is the political pressure greater, or more laden with financial rewards, than

along the Tunisian and Libyan coastline, where every month thousands of migrants try to jump to Southern Europe. The destination is often Italy's fingertip, Lampedusa, a nearly treeless, rocky island 200 kilometers south of Sicily and 150 kilometers north of Tunisia. Every few days, boats limp into the harbor at Lampedusa, and repatriation begins. But just as often the boats don't make it. Last October 5th, for example, 70 Moroccans and five Tunisians were just a few hours off the Tunisian coast, off the town of Chott Meriem, 170 km south-east of Tunis, when their boat broke up. Eleven migrants survived. Twenty-eight bodies were recovered.

According to NGO officials, the bodies, which were not identified, were buried in Tunisia. Approximately 150 Moroccans waiting to follow the first boat were arrested and deported to Morocco where they were jailed. The incident was particularly tragic because the dead included at least 50 young men from a small village 140 kilo-



Parents and relatives gather in Khouribga to inquire about the *harraga*'s fate. Photo by Mark MacNamara.

meters east of Casablanca, on the Plateau des Phosphates, called El Fokra.

To reach El Fokra, you go through Khouribga, a city of 500,000, and best known for a 60-million-year-old phosphate deposit, a geological palace known as Oulad Abdoun. It's this deposit, run by the government, the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), which makes Morocco one of the three leading sources of exportable phosphate ore in the world. You drive south through the town, past the Hotel Farah, where mining executives and foreign contractors sip wine by the pool, through downtown and under the railroad tracks carrying 60-car phosphate trains that leave for the coast every half hour, around the clock, year after year; past the Quartier Riad, where young men, eyes blazing, arms flying, insist the local unemployment rate is 80 percent (Government and NGO sources say it's closer to 30 percent).

"What can we do?" the men say, pointing out they have this degree or that. "There are no options here."

"What about moving to another city?" you ask.

"It's like this everywhere," they say. "The whole country, and the more educated you are, the harder it is to find work, especially if you don't have connections. Without that, you're nothing."

You keep going, through the elegant old neighborhoods built for French bureaucrats during the "French period," which reached its peak in the late 1940s and early '50s, past the ragged outskirts of town, marked by unfinished buildings and in the distance, phosphate pyramids known as "overburdens"; past the sound of blasting, past even the smell of phosphate, which permeates the city on breezy afternoons; past the vast city dump that lines the road for miles, the land dotted with grocery-sized blue, white and black plastic bags, like so many balloons. Keep going past all that and the land becomes neat and clean, and quiet again. The desert resumes and the earth rolls and dips languorously.

After a few more minutes you come to a sign that reads El Fokra, which means the Noble or "the Great." It's the name of a local tribe and also the name of a village, although none is in sight. But over the rise, thrown out on the landscape, there's a house on a ridge to the left and then another



Hicham Ractidi trying to help. Photo by Mark MacNamara.

er and a quarter mile further on, another house on the right. Occasionally, a rectangular-shaped water tower stands jagged and awkward. A tree here, there. Small children fly over the rocks. Keep going and you'll pass a three-walled building on the side of the road, fruit and vegetables all neatly laid out. But before you get there you come to the center of town—a well and a few buildings close together.

Late last summer, hope arrived in El Fokra.

Someone, although it's not quite clear who, spread word that the time was right to get to Italy.

El Fokra has perhaps 5,000 people. The place is neither rich nor poor, relatively

speaking, but jobs are rare and nearly every young person who hasn't left seems to want to leave. One would think that the phosphate mines would provide adequate jobs, but many of the approximately 20,000 people who do the strip mining come from other parts of the country. When the French ran the mines, they mistrusted unions and brought in workers who had no local ties and were more dependent upon the company. That policy stopped when the Moroccan government took over; but in recent years, most of the jobs go to people from other regions because unemployment has become such a problem country-wide.

Late last summer, hope arrived in El Fokra. Someone, although it's not quite clear who, spread word that the time was right to get to Italy. The plan was to fly to Tunis and catch a boat to Lampedusa. Between September 10 and 25, 100 young men, mostly in their 20s (they have to be old enough to get a passport), left the village in groups and took flights to Tunis. In several families, three, four, even five brothers were lured away.

The government says the recruiters that came to El Fokra are *al-muharrribun*—the mafia or "international operators." Local people refer to them as *harraga* lords, but these are not conventional gang lords. They are simply individuals with extensive connections, some of which include smugglers of one thing or another. And so a friend of a friend may find you on the street in Khouribga one day and discreetly inquire whether you might be interested in going to Europe. You are interested, of course, because the only local job prospects are in the black market, which produces knick-knacks and toys for street vendors and small stores in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. These micro economies provide urban subsistence, but not enough to attract a wife and start a family.

If you are undecided about whether to go, the *harraga* lord could add incentive: "Well, then perhaps your brothers might also be interested and, if they come, you'll get a commission." Word spreads. Men pay between 1,000 and 1,500 Euros for the trip. They get the money with difficulty, but perhaps with less and less difficulty as leaving has become more socially accepted. Fathers sell what they have on the promise

that their sons will send back the family's investment and more.

On the second floor of a local trade school and immigrant center, six days after the boat full of local *harraga* sank, Hicham Racttidi counts still again an envelope full of passport-sized photos. The young men in the photos all have calm, enigmatic expressions, neither smiling nor frowning. Parents and relatives have been bringing the photos to Racttidi ever since news spread of the sinking. The small room is crowded with older men—fathers and uncles. This is not a mother's work.

Mr. Racttidi is the vice president of Amis & Familles des Victimes de L'Immigration Clandestine. He is an old-looking 33, tall and slender. He answers questions directly. He does not address the issue of hope. He says what he knows: Eleven people have survived, 30 bodies had been recovered and 34 are missing. The identification process has been slow. Government officials in both Tunisia and Morocco have no news.

The other connotation of *harg* is "to escape." A companion word might also be *lahrig*, which means, "to avoid." However, an appropriate English translation of *harg* might be "to skip" ahead or over.

The looming horror is that most of the dead and missing are all from El Foqra. Part of the evidence that links the men from El Foqra together is that fifty-one of the telephone calls made to relatives in the hours before the boat left all came from Soussa. One other call came from Nobel. These are seaside towns near where the boat left. That the young men have not called back is very unusual because the "Moroccan way" for refugees is that when

you get to Europe, the first thing you do is get something to eat. The second is to call home.

Meanwhile, the men are eager to talk about their sons and nephews. One uncle recounts what a good student the boy is—everything is still in the present tense—how he loves mathematics above everything, and doesn't smoke, doesn't lie and has no girl friends. He's very religious and at 24 everything he does is for his family. But then, says the uncle, not referring to his nephew, boys these days; they see the cars and the rich lifestyle of the people that return. They become "disoriented." He himself has worked in the phosphate mines for 27 years. His vest, his work shirt, his undershirt, everything is browned with phosphate. And probably his lungs, adds Racttidi later.

"He's very obedient," says a father about his son. The man has blue eyes and a white baseball cap. The ends of his lips are turned down in a sour expression. "The boy never fights. He's a pacifist. With two little girls. That's why he went away to get the money for his family. I told him it was dangerous but he doesn't see any other way." And then the father tells the story of how his son, 29, last called at around 4 p.m. on Saturday, and how he talked to his wife and finally his children and when he talked to 4-year-old he cried. Mr. Racttidi explains to relatives that his organization is arranging a trip to Tunis on Sunday to match the photos with the bodies, and then get the bodies back as soon as possible.

But that will never happen. Mr. Racttidi will not go to Tunis; the bodies will not be identified or returned to Morocco. The whole affair will be treated as a delicate government matter and the NGOs that deal with migrants will not be allowed to participate.



While the press sometimes translates *harraga* to mean "adventurers," the more precise and illuminating meaning comes from the infinitive form of the verb, *harg*, which

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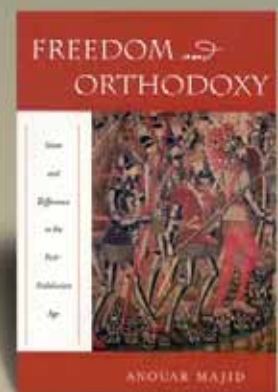
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- Gil Anidjar, Columbia University

Author of *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*.





*Around Fez, watercolor, by Tania Beaumont*

means, “to burn.” In the context of immigration strictly from Morocco, *harg* has two connotations. Both have become pejorative. One connotation is to “burn bridges.” *Harraga* arrive in Europe as terrestrial aliens without identity. When they’re caught, or rescued, or their bodies recovered, they have no papers, not even clothing labels, nothing to clarify point of departure or origin. Before Europe shut its doors on legal immigration in the early 1990s, that ambiguity might have led to political asylum. Now, no matter how heart-rending the tale of economic deprivation or government-sponsored torture, without absolute proof, a political “excuse” has little currency.

The other connotation of *harg* is “to escape.” A companion word might also be *lahrig*, which means, “to avoid.” However, an appropriate English translation of *harg* might be “to skip” ahead or over. As in to skip out of your community and “make it” somewhere else, according to those who lament the trend. As in to skip the Moroccan credo that promises success if you’ll just work hard and be patient.

As an aside, a college student from Casablanca told me that the *harraga* are hated wherever they go. “If you are Moroccan *harrag* in Southern Europe, they hate you; they treat you like dirt. But they need you because they can’t find their own people to work. People in Spain will tell you that the kids there are totally spoiled. But the way the Spanish look at Moroccans is much the way we look at people from the Sub Sahara coming here for work. Everyone is moving north to find their niche and looking for a higher rung on the ladder to look at others below them.”

In Khouribga, the desire to leave has become epidemic in recent years. Some people describe it as an obsession. The fever reaches its peak in summer when the whole town, especially “Little Italy,” is overrun with returning sons—all the new “winners,” wearing fine suits and driving new cars. Local girls are swept away and see these men as their own ticket out. Last summer there were something like 35 weddings a day in Khouribga.

“It happens like this,” Mr. Racttidi told me as we sat in his office that day after the relatives had left. “A 10-year-old boy sees his older brother having gone to school, but now without a job because the family has no connections. Without connections you have no chance in this society. But then he sees his cousin returning in the summer from Italy. He’s driving a brand new car; he spends money like it’s nothing and the boy thinks, ‘I want to be like my cousin.’”

Racttidi shakes his head at the idea. “People are not starving here. But society has become caught up in this cycle that you see in Europe and America. Fifty years ago a boy from a poor family would become a shepherd. There was no choice. ‘It is written,’ he would say to himself. Then it became, ‘I want.’ And now it’s become, ‘I need.’”

A prominent Moroccan educator told me privately that this is perhaps the greatest challenge the country faces: to teach the next generation, and from an early age, the value of giving back to the community. This generation, he said, is lost.

After three decades in which the message and the promise was to work and to study, the new message, the new Moroccan way of life is just ‘find your way to Italy or Spain.’”

“Of course, this is not an easy process,” acknowledges Mr. Racttidi. “The families have very mixed feelings and often the father or the uncle will say, ‘This is too dangerous.’ But in the end everyone gives into this psychology.”

“What does the Koran say about immigration?” I asked.

“The Koran gives you two ways to look at this (if you are thinking about becoming an clandestine immigrant). It says if you are being persecuted in some way, psychically or mentally, you can leave your family or your village. But it also says you must not put your life at risk. Of course, now these young people aren’t being guided by the Koran. It’s what they see on television. That’s all they can think about. And now this city has become like a huge waiting room.”

A few days after the tragedy in Tunis, in a café in Khouribga, I met Dr. Mustapha Scadi, a socialist member of Parliament from Khouribga. Dr. Scadi is a cardiologist and spent four years in Europe, himself. He says he well understands the motives of the immigrants, but doesn’t support their “obsession.”

“I came back because I prefer it here. After all, it’s your country; you have your family. But these young people don’t value these things anymore. Their dreams have betrayed them.”

But then how do you keep young people from leaving, particularly when poverty is not the whole issue, but more this desire to taste materialism first hand? And how do you instill a sense of national loyalty, even obligation?

A prominent Moroccan educator told me privately that this is perhaps the greatest challenge the country faces: to teach the next generation, and from an early age, the value of giving back to the community. This generation, he said, is lost. He went on to say that universities need to impart a spirit of entrepreneurship and focus on empowering students. He added that Morocco's educated are, in their own way, *harraga*. He pointed out that among those who have left the country is a project manager for NASA's Mars program.

Recently, I met with some students at a local high school. Many are from the country's elite. They were preparing to take SAT tests in Rabat and expect to go to college in the United States next year. I asked why they wanted to go to college. They smiled at such an absurd question.

"I want to help the family business and just live a nice life," one boy replied.

But what about those that don't have a nice life?

"The problem is too big; there's nothing you can do?"

"Well then what about starting a company of your own? Or what about. . ."

The student cut me off.

"You can't do that here. There's too much corruption. You need connections to do anything. Why struggle against the system?"

It's that old aw-shucks conviction that if you need to go to say, the moon, for whatever reason, good or bad, you can do it: you can imagine a way, work out the obstacles, sell it to somebody out there, and then get on a schedule, work like a dog, make some luck, pray to baseball, and one day you'll be there.

No question that the packaging of American culture, and the Big Mac power of materialism itself, has drained the intellectual resources of developing countries. And for sure that depletes community strength and spirit. But if America's interest in the world often seems ambiguous, grounded more in profit than progress, it still offers one great export—relentless optimism. It's that old aw-shucks conviction that if you need to go to say, the moon,

for whatever reason, good or bad, you can do it: you can imagine a way, work out the obstacles, sell it to somebody out there, and then get on a schedule, work like a dog, make some luck, pray to baseball, and one day you'll be there.

Despite the mandate given George Bush for his second term, you could argue that America is becoming more mindful of its size in the world. It's slowly becoming more aware of itself. But the question is not whether America can accept the truth that democracy is not a product, not the new "new thing" that everybody has to have right now, but whether under the sheer weight of itself, it can still empower other nations, whether it can retain its imagination and drive, its own *harraga* spirit.

*Mark MacNamara is a free-lance journalist living in Morocco.*



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# Tinfou

by  
*Said Leghlid*

I took a sip from this new culture,  
drowned in a pool of grape juice,  
became imprisoned momentarily,  
and empoisoned for eternity.

On my journey,  
after twenty blue moons,  
I was wired up, doused up  
from vacuum cleaners,  
Jehovah's witnesses,  
terror warnings,  
Sara Lees, sarsaparillas,  
cream sodas, cappuccinos  
midnight hot dog snacks,  
TV commercials,  
sensational HBO, and Faux news  
blood and gore movies,  
carbs and turbo diets.

Suddenly, I found my body surrounded  
by screaming silence,  
and jealous of that agonizing moment,  
I embraced it, allowed it to take me away,  
into the void of my saturated soul,  
so it can hear its echo reverberate  
across the barren desert dunes.

Tinfou, I screamed, here I come!  
dripping sweat, spoon by spoon,  
this sand, wishful and hardly disillusioned,  
rebelled against the most renegade  
clumsy clouds that pass over this desecrated land  
year after year, and hardly ever shed a tear.

Four wheel strains on the sandy tracks,  
coming from as far as Shangri-la  
to see the beauty of nothingness,  
where camels once stood,  
and vanished at high speed,  
leaving all of us behind,  
absent in our own minds,  
and begrudging the elements  
that made us fly away.

Ms. Julie was hot,  
and Tinfou was hotter than Ms.Oubliette,  
yet no one cared or noticed,  
they were bathing on this old veiled sand dune,  
with visible varicose veins,  
forever weary if I'd say grace  
or if I'd say bismillah,  
and eat with five fingers.

Madame, pass the red vinegar please!  
and if all the blessings from heaven were true,  
it would be a savory spirit to celebrate,  
and I will drink to this thirsty sand  
as I feared I would someday.

Steam, rising, evaporating,  
for millenniums  
beneath this majestic dune,  
like a cultural hegemony,  
where savvy brains, and colossal chests,  
departed in search of a loaf of money,  
where opportunity spread like raw dough,  
leaving their nostalgic barren walls behind,  
and every chance at connecting with an estranged past.

It stormed sand and rocks for five days,  
and the palm trees were buried under tons of sand,  
I watched foam rise above the cup of merlot  
that used to be my tea with mint,  
and its aroma became  
a succulent joy far beyond my palate  
where my knees used to be lodged,  
I could still smell tea through the sand,  
and the mirage was so real, and so Moroccan.

July was hotter than June  
and I noticed,  
for the sake of fall and spring,  
that I could somehow tell the difference  
between culture and religion.

Almost full and always empty  
this glass of life awaiting a cool breeze  
to douse my djellaba with reality,  
and make my senses come together  
with every weave I try to cherish,  
and every loom I must relinquish.

At midnight, years later,  
I laughed hysterically,  
on top of this dune,  
with my ego, and the other self professing naturalist  
watching every move we made,  
I realized, we were inches away,  
from where we thought we started.

Downward from the heavens,  
spiraled galaxies with pleas  
and I was still stuffed,  
yet empty on Thanksgiving,  
startled on Halloween,

and frightened on Christmas,  
drunk on New-Year's eve,  
and awkward on chimaera's day,  
reminiscing on raw shrimp  
and Paul Newman's couscous sauce.

I recognized, the dune must be sad,  
her lantern almost scorched me,  
and her desolate reason blinded me,  
she was searching for my sanity,  
and she found my rancor,  
a bubble in a forgotten world  
a wild bear bound to her zoo,  
and she shined like a shimmering pearl.

In the heat of that night,  
she stuffed my cheek with her torch,  
bound me to a flying carpet,  
and let me soar high into the past,  
till I became part of my element,  
a blue man again,  
she answered my will,  
and resurrected me into her image.

I was thankful to Tinfou,  
gently extinguished her torch where  
once existed a small flame,  
barely visible to the stars above,  
and she became the companion  
of extinct flames below.

No tears, and no sparks,  
no smiles crawling from this pedestal,  
and no desires to mimic  
the sanctity of her love,  
from a mile high sand dune  
where I once grew up,  
she knew me well.

Tinfou sits there,  
sober and defiant,  
weary and vagabond,  
she can never quench my thirst  
and when I lay on top of her,  
she makes me sweat,  
and never regret I visited her again.

*Said Leghlid came to the United States in 1984 to represent Morocco as part of a world showcase fellowship program sponsored by Walt Disney World to promote friendship between nations. He holds a master's degree in organizational communications and is currently a partner in a new media company. He dedicates a lot of his time to writing poetry and is working on his first novel.*



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# Reflections on the American Election of 2004

By  
*Paul T. Burlin*

As many of us who were “born and bred” in the United States slowly began to recover from the very demoralizing, but not at all unexpected results of the recent national election, the editor of *Tingis*, Anouar Majid, a friend and colleague of mine, thought it might be worthwhile if one of our number wrote a few words about our understanding of the meaning of November 2, 2004. What follows are a few personal observations on the recent election. Some of them are no doubt shared by others who, like myself, not only voted against George Bush, but believed that the stakes in this election were higher than at any other time in a good number of years.

I should preface my remarks first by saying that although I am a registered Democrat, I do not have a partisan ax to grind. I vote quite independently; and here in Maine where I live, we are fortunate to have a long history of moderate Republican politicians of national stature, a number of whom I have voted for in the past. Senators William Cohen and Olympia Snowe come most readily to mind in this regard. Second, I should also point out that from my point of view, the differences between the Democrats and the Republicans are often quite minimal, particularly when it comes to foreign affairs. Therefore, I do not typically expect any sort of fundamental reorientation of the country’s relationship to the rest of the world on the occasion of the opposition

Like 2004, I felt strongly that the results of the election of 1968 were of enormous importance in terms of where the country was likely to go in the near future.

party coming to power. Long continuities are much more impressive to me than are changes when I read the historical record of America’s involvement with the world.

That said, like many others, I really did think that the Kerry-Edwards ticket repre-



Today, the divide (or, perhaps, divides) lies along quite different lines. It is not generational so much as it is a reflection of a long, historical division in American culture and society between what might be called "cosmopolitans" and "provincials."

sented a quite significant alternative to George Bush and Dick Cheney. I believed strongly that there was a real choice offered to the American people, a choice on both foreign policy and domestic affairs. I was not at all sure that Kerry had a viable "plan" to remedy the situation in Iraq; however, I knew very well that Bush had nothing to offer other than his untested convictions. He is, after all, responsible for the mess in Iraq in the first place. Put succinctly, he seems to understand very little about the world at large. In domestic affairs, it was clear to me that a Kerry administration would be better for the hard-pressed lower and middle classes. As the long campaign proceeded through the summer and into the fall, my mind kept wandering to 1968, the first election for which I was old enough to vote. I was in the Peace Corps on a small Pacific island in November 1968, but I still vividly remember sitting alone on the floor of my small, thatched house, glued to the BBC World News broadcast on my battery powered, short wave radio. Like 2004, I felt strongly that the results of the election of 1968 were of enormous importance in terms of where the country was likely to go in the near future.

That election, like the one that has just passed, was very charged, divisive and controversial. The war in Vietnam was raging in 1968, and like many college students my age, I had worked hard for Senator Eugene McCarthy who was challenging Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination. McCarthy favored a ceasefire and rapid end to the war. Many of us absolutely despised Johnson for expanding American involvement in

Vietnam and for rationalizing it as a defense of democracy against Communist tyranny, instead of seeing it for what it in fact was, a war of nationalism and national liberation from which the United States had little or nothing to fear. In the end, Johnson's Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, received the nomination after utter mayhem broke out on the convention floor in Chicago when young political activists expressed their outrage at the direction the Democratic Party was taking. Many of us saw Humphrey simply as a Johnson clone and we continued to support McCarthy and ultimately voted for him. Richard Nixon ran at the head of the Republican ticket that year and, of course, won the election with his unspecified "plan" to extricate the country from the horrors of Vietnam. "Peace with Honor" was Nixon's campaign slogan; but, as events would have it, he was completely disgraced by Watergate and long out of office before the United States departed Vietnam in 1975 in ignominious defeat. As I write these words, I can still feel the passion and discord of that era so many years ago.

If the cultural wars of the 1960s can be explained in terms of a generational divide and the war in Vietnam, how does one make sense of the current cultural conflict? Why has the old cosmopolitan and provincial divide surfaced once again?

The most glaring similarity between 1968 and 2004 is, of course, yet another war. While there are certainly many differences between the war the United States fought in Vietnam, and those it is currently waging in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are a number of overarching similarities as well. One of those is that there exists a deep, emotionally charged gulf that divides the American people on Iraq. Feelings run very high, loyalty and patriotism are questioned, personal recriminations abound. The quiet, consensual, politics-as-usual

that so often characterizes elections in the United States were not much evident in either 1968 or 2004.

Approximately fifty percent of the American voting population (depending on the poll one reads) firmly believes what the Bush administration says about Iraq; namely, that the war there is for the purpose of spreading democracy and the inalienable rights articulated in the Declaration of Independence. They also believe that these are not only the birthrights of the Iraqi people, but when the Iraqis in fact have them, the United States will be more secure from future terrorist attacks.

Roughly the other half of the people sees the war in Iraq as a much more self-serving endeavor to "stabilize" the Middle East in the interest of low or moderately priced oil, and/or as a misguided effort to impose American values and beliefs on a country with a much different history and culture. Many of this group are also appalled that the President believes the country has a divine mission to do what it is doing in Iraq. Many of these people also simply do not believe the connection the government alleges between Iraq and those who attacked the United States in September 2001. While this schema to some extent oversimplifies the political panorama in the United States today regarding Iraq, in general terms, it is accurate.

There is another element, however, which also seems to mirror 1968. That is the enormous cultural divide in the country that has received so much attention of late by the political pundits. The cultural divide in 2004 lies along a different axis than that of 1968, but it is just as visceral and, to a significant degree, it appears to coincide with positions people take on the question of Iraq.

The cultural divide of the 1960s lay along generational fault lines. A perfect symbol of that divide was portrayed in the 1967 movie *The Graduate*. The young college graduate played by Dustin Hoffman holds his parents and their contemporaries in utter disdain because he believes they are hypocritical, inauthentic and deeply repressed, denying all that is real around them. While there was a good deal that was downright adolescent, self-absorbed and self-righteous in the perspective pre-

sented in that film, the movie reflected a cultural divide of the period rather well.

Today, the divide (or, perhaps, divides) lies along quite different lines. It is not generational so much as it is a reflection of a long, historical division in American culture and society between what might be called “cosmopolitans” and “provincials.” Another way to describe the divide is between those quite at home in the modern world of reason and science, and those who still have at least one foot in the pre-modern world of biblical literalism and traditional moral absolutes. What is particularly interesting about this cultural phenomenon is that it is not always at the surface of American life. It ebbs and flows.

A notable example of an absolute flood tide of this phenomenon was the famous (or infamous) Scopes or Monkey Trial that took place in 1925 in a small town in Tennessee. The issue was whether or not the Darwinian theory of evolution could be taught in the public schools. William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, the three-time Democratic candidate for President, former Secretary of State, and religious fundamentalist who believed in the literal interpretation of the Bible, defended Tennessee's right to ban the teaching of evolution in its schools. The most famous trial lawyer of the day, the urbane Clarence Darrow, who had defended a number of radical and unpopular clients, took the opposing side on behalf of the New York-based American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Although Bryan won the case, in the course of the trial, Darrow put him on the witness stand and then proceeded to humiliate him by pointing out all of the contradictions in his literal reading of the Bible. It was a classic case of the cosmopolitan and provincial worlds colliding. Those worlds still exist in the United States almost eighty years later.

Although the question of evolution and creationism still reverberate in some parts of the country, many other cultural issues, some related, some not, have come to the fore in recent years. These issues run the gamut from abortion, the use of birth control and prayer in public schools, to the proper place of women in American socie-



ty and the question of gay marriage. None of these issues have anything directly to do with economic interest, or what are often called “pocketbook” issues; all of them have a lot to do with differing opinions on morality and differing existential world-views.

If the cultural wars of the 1960s can be explained in terms of a generational divide and the war in Vietnam, how does one make sense of the current cultural conflict? Why has the old cosmopolitan and provincial divide surfaced once again? It strikes me that two small reports that appeared during the presidential campaign are quite telling in this regard. In an article by Ron Suskind which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, the author related a conversation he had with a White House operative. Suskind's article was titled “Without a Doubt,” and explored Bush's unwavering conviction that he was doing God's work in Iraq and elsewhere in the world. Suskind's skepticism about this

belief in divine mission was not concealed during his interview with a Bush loyalist and this prompted the latter to say that Bush supporters don't care much about people like Suskind, meaning “the entire reality-based community.” The other example concerns another of the Bush political advisors who stated at one point that the election divided those who went to church with their families one or more times a week, and those who did not.

I think these small incidents suggest several things of importance. First, Bush has great affinity for, and resonates deeply with, the great swath of provincials who people much of the interior of the country and the South. Bush's “born again” experience, his “down home” folksy style, and his support for the symbolic and value issues of these people gave him high level of support among provincials in the election just past. In addition, many of those same people feel condescended to, and oppressed by the urbane, well-educated, coastal elites. Kerry personified those elites to a tee. Whether it be liberals who question if the word “God” should be in the pledge of allegiance, or the Massachusetts Supreme Court which came out in support of gay marriage, many of those in the interior of the country and in the South feel that their personal values, beliefs and self-worth are continually under assault by people like John Kerry.

What probably lies even deeper at the base of the ironic election outcome is a fundamental, and long-standing failure of the American people to come to grips in any realistic way with the issue of class.

Unfortunately, until such time as the Democratic Party, or some other viable opposition group, finds a way to make the reality of the economic decline of the middle and lower classes a more salient issue than whether or not it is permissible to pray in public schools, the future will be bleak.

Years ago, a well known historian, Richard Hofstadter, used the distinction made by some social scientists between “interest” politics and “status” politics to help explain some of the apparent irrationalities of American political culture. Interest politics concerns economic and “bread and butter” issues; status politics concerns personal feelings regarding the respect

and credence (or lack thereof) that one receives from others in society. One way to understand this last election is that, apparently, for many people, particularly those in the center and southern portion of the country, status politics trumped interest politics. The breathtaking irony is that because of the cultural issues, many of those who voted for Bush actually cast bal-

lots, wittingly or not, in support of a regressive tax program, the privatization of a portion of Social Security, and other economic policies that will hurt them in the coming years. Those same policies also inure directly to the benefit of the wealthy elites, regardless of whether they are Democratic or Republican, or live in Oklahoma or California.





What probably lies even deeper at the base of the ironic election outcome is a fundamental, and long-standing failure of the American people to come to grips in any realistic way with the issue of class. In gen-

eral, Americans still believe the rags-to-riches myth that serves to render elites less threatening from an economic point of view because, according to that myth, anyone can rise to such heights. Those cur-

rently at the top worked hard and deserve their place and power, or so it is believed. Focusing on whether political leaders share their personal values is much easier for many people to do than recognizing



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that those of the corporate, legal and political elites often were not rags-to-riches success stories, and just as often have fundamentally different interests than do average Americans. Elite members of society who appear to be godless or relativistic in their moral judgments provide a convenient target when life becomes more difficult, as it has been doing for the middle and lower classes for a good number of years now. With the enormous concentrated power of the electronic media in the United States today, the manipulation of the population by those who find it in their best interest to do so is not at all difficult. The 1968 election included its share of economic and domestic policy issues too. However, whereas Nixon converted to liberal Keynesian economics, and even went so far as to propose a guaranteed annual income (his Family Assistance Plan), the second term Bush administration seems set to pursue, with renewed vigor and enhanced political clout, a domestic economic agenda designed to undermine virtually everything that has collective or social underpinnings and replace them with what is individual and private.

Unfortunately, until such time as the Democratic Party, or some other viable opposition group, finds a way to make the reality of the economic decline of the middle and lower classes a more salient issue than whether or not it is permissible to pray in public schools, the future will be bleak.

At some point interest politics will again surface across the nation. Exactly when that will occur is anyone's guess. Perhaps, after another four years of borrowing huge amounts of money to wage war around the globe, and regressive tax policies that make themselves ever more widely felt, the majority of the American people in more states and areas of the country will put aside their petty but deeply felt status injuries, and vote for individuals with more enlightened views. At this point, one can only hope that will be the case.

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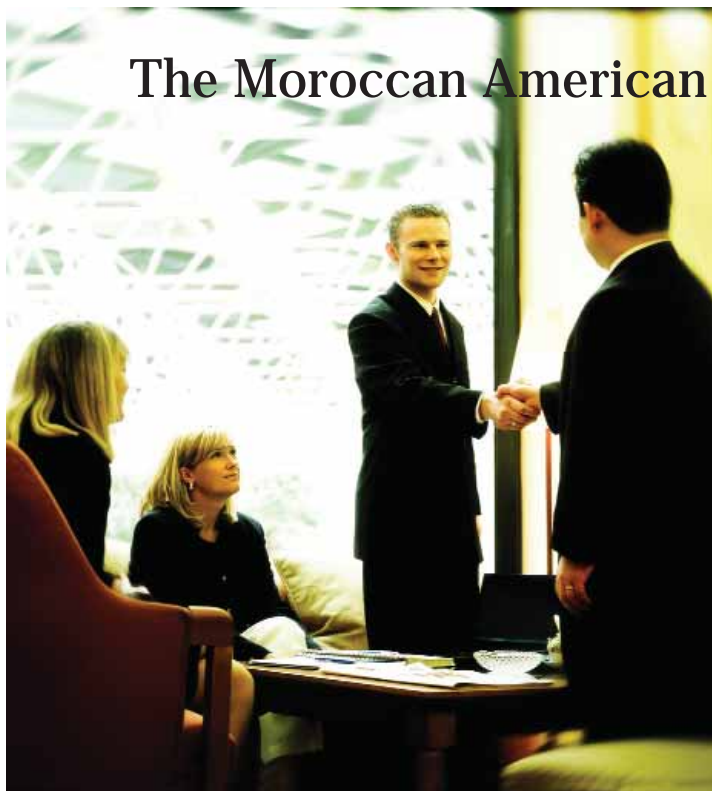
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