

Power and Passion in the Muslim World

An Interview with Jocelyne Dakhli

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Jocelyne Dakhli has addressed clichés about oriental despotism and Islam's incompatibility with democracy through an historical examination of the form and logic of power in Muslim societies. Her prolific oeuvre, which spans Islamic history from the sultanate courts of the Middle Ages to contemporary Tunisia, redefines the boundaries of the Mediterranean and challenges us to think of European history in different terms.

Jocelyne Dakhli is a professor at EHESS and a specialist in the history of the Islamic world and the Mediterranean. The following is a list of her main publications:

- *L'Oubli de la cité. La mémoire collective à l'épreuve du lignage dans le Jérid tunisien* (Forgetting the City: Collective Memory and the Challenge of Lineage in the Tunisian Djerid), Paris, La Découverte, 1990.

- *Le Divan des rois. Le Politique et le religieux dans l'Islam* (The King's Divan: Politics and Religion in Islam), Paris, Aubier, 1998.

- Editor, *Trames de langues. Usages et métissages linguistiques dans l'histoire du Maghreb* (The Thread of Language: Linguistic Usage and Mixing in the History of the Maghreb), Paris /Tunis, Maisonneuve & Larose/Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2004.

- *L'Empire des passions. L'arbitraire politique en Islam* (The Realm of Passions: Political Arbitrariness in Islam), Paris, Aubier, 2005.

- *Islamicités* (Islami-cities), Paris, PUF, 2005.

- *Lingua franca*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2008.

- Co-edited with Bernard Vincent, *Les Musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe. I, une intégration invisible* (Muslims in European History, vol. 1: An Invisible Integration). Paris, Albin Michel, 2011.

- Co-edited with Wolfgang Kaiser, *Les Musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe. II, Passages et contacts en Méditerranée* (Muslims in European History, vol. 2: Mediterranean Contacts and Passages), Paris, Albin Michel, 2013.

- *Tunisie, le pays sans bruit* (Tunisia: A Land without Noise), Arles, Actes Sud, 2011.

Books & Ideas: Your work covers an impressive swathe of the history of the Muslim and Mediterranean world from the Middle Ages to the present. You have, in several landmark works, called attention to a tradition of sultanic rule that contradicts the unfortunately still popular cliché that Islam is inclined towards despotism and theocracy. You have also studied the cultural exchanges between the Mediterranean's north and south shores, even touching on the problem of integration in contemporary French society. Between history, anthropology, and sociology, where do you place yourself?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: One of my books was published as part of an anthropological series, while others—*Islamicités*, for instance—have been published in sociological series. But these are just editors' classifications. When I started practicing history, in the eighties, historical anthropology was flourishing. In Brittany and Burgundy, archival research crossed paths with the present. I began working on medieval Islamic texts without seeing any incompatibility between historical and anthropological approaches. At the time, anthropologists—notably Ernest Gellner, Clifford Geertz, and those who were interested not only in North Africa, but, more generally, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Muslim world—were on our readings lists and counted among our theoretical references and research tools for understanding the Arab world.

Later, I increasingly defined myself as an historian—but an historian whose tools were perhaps more varied than those of her colleagues. I distanced myself less from anthropology than from ethnology. Fieldwork—which for me is essential and formative—increasingly struck me as a violent practice. Showing up among people you have never met and asking them questions has an inquisitorial dimension that disturbs me—even if these people know how to throw disturbing questions back at their interrogators. This violence can also be found in the historian's approach. You sometimes stumble upon archives which make you feel like you are intruding on the private lives of people who have been dead for centuries. This plunge into intimate spaces, which thrills some historians, feels to me like retroactive violence. Discovering a case of adultery, for example, can leave you feeling like you have wound up somewhere you don't belong.

Some might assume that I was very influenced in all this by Edward Saïd's work on orientalism. It is true that when I began studying history, orientalism was being hotly debated and Saïd's book was still new (it had appeared in 1978). But this debate never really affected me. My initial approach was to act and work within the context of Tunisian society, my home. For a long time, what mattered to me was having an impact on Tunisian and Maghrebini society. At the time, I must confess, I was not especially interested in the problem of the orientalist gaze, and, in fact, I did not work much on colonialism per se. In any event, whatever logic there is to my trajectory lies in this commitment.

Sultanic Culture: A Forgotten Political Tradition

Books & Ideas: In your historical work, you make much use of stories, narratives, and chronicles. You identify what you call the “motifs” of narratives concerning power in the Islamic world, which you contextualize to better grasp the scope of their validity. Could you explain how you came up with this method?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: When one works on Islam, and presumably on other cultural areas as well, one confronts the question of whether a culture is coherent or not, as well as the relationship between its different elements, such as, for instance, the relationship between local cultures and more educated transnational cultures. When you’re doing fieldwork, there are times when these cultural motifs seem quite literally to grab you. You leap from motif to motif, from theme to theme. They guide you. When someone tells you a story about a saint—and you know, from your reading, that exactly the same story is told in Algeria, Morocco, and perhaps even Egypt—you are immediately confronted with problems of the cultural coherence and hierarchy of narratives. The study of motifs makes it possible to examine the totality, as well as the limits, of this cultural coherence: there is nothing, in the countries I’ve studied, to suggest that the problem of cultural coherence is confined to Islam. For example, stories about Solomon are a bridge to cultures on the other side of the Mediterranean. This is why I sense that cultures are nebulous. They are not dense, enclosed, and coherent totalities; they are loose and intertwined, permanently squeezed against one another.¹

Motifs must be studied at different levels and on different scales. In the first place, they allow us to identify norms. In the Islamic world, from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, the genre of “mirrors for princes” decreed the norms of good sultanic government, while also describing the concrete ways in which monarchical power was practiced. These handbooks of good government assert, for example, that a just prince must, at least twice a week, grant his subjects an audience; indeed, there are many stories and legends about good princes who honor the requirement to grant audiences. By fine-tuning this approach and examining it in more specific contexts, we can determine the concrete social practices to which they correspond. By comparing them to other types of texts, we can learn if a sovereign did or did not make himself available on Tuesdays or Thursdays, for example. In my own work, I have gone from this very general approach to considering commonplaces in *Le Divan des rois* to a more concrete approach, focusing on political crises, in *L’Empire des passions*. And I consider the book I am currently writing on the sultanic harem as the third volume in this series. In it, I study in detail a single dynasty—or at least a single monarchical tradition—in a particular national context, that of Morocco, in order to grasp the specific ways in which it ruled and practiced power, including its gendered dimensions. It is thus an opportunity to do gender history, notably as it relates to eunuchs and young palace pages, as well as the history of slavery. Yet, it can be demonstrated, being a slave in such societies did not necessarily place you at the bottom of the social ladder. I try, in short, to understand all the ingredients of systems of domination—their “racial” aspects, naturally, but also status, freedom, and so on.

¹ “La culture nébuleuse ou l’Islam à l’épreuve de la comparaison,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 56, 2001, p. 1177-1199.

I dwell on Morocco because it inspired—as did other places—a fantastical representation of the harem and a kind of harem orientalism. But Morocco is also interesting because it once played an important role in the representation of oriental despotism. Ideas about orientalism typically assign a central role to the Ottoman Empire and Persia. But we forget that, for early modern men and women, despotic power had another pole: Morocco. This was particularly true in England. I am also trying to understand the porous boundaries and reciprocal exchange which, at the time, existed between Islam and Europe as political models. In this respect, Morocco is fascinating, as it interacted closely—both peacefully and conflictually—with Europe, despite the fact that we now tend to see it as a very closed society, as it was for a period in the nineteenth century—a little like Japan at the time. Morocco thus provides an opportunity to see which political representations circulated from one society to another and from one end of the Mediterranean to the other.

Books & Ideas: In *Le Divan des rois*, you show that there existed an atheological sultanic culture, which had autonomy vis-à-vis religious authorities. Can you explain what led to the forgetting of this tradition, which remains largely absent from discussions about the specific character of power in the Islamic world?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: I felt a need to address these questions when I was still very young. When I began studying history, the Iranian Revolution was only a few years old. There was a great deal of interest in Islamic theocracy, and many rather hasty analyses defined Islam as inherently theocratic. It was believed that one could never expect democracy to arise from the Islamic world. Later, once I had become a professional historian, I was asked to write two short articles for the journal *Le Genre humain* (The Human Race),² one on the question “Is Islam compatible with democracy?” and the other on the problem of secularism (*laïcité*). These brief texts, which I wrote in a bit of a rush, express, to some degree, the core convictions I still embrace today, particularly since the Tunisian Revolution.

This reflection on the relationship between religion and politics allows us to address, at present, the question of Islamism in power and to show that most analyses are based on the assumption that Muslim society is inherently “backwards” in relation to the West. In Islamic societies, we are told, politics must become more autonomous; yet sultanic literature (works of advice for princes, but also chronicles) demonstrates that examples of political autonomy can be found in Islamic society as far back as the eighth or ninth centuries. A realm of political autonomy already existed, in a way; all that is needed is to make it visible and re-legitimate it (as it was disqualified, along with Islamic regimes as a whole, due to its failure to ward off colonialism). The problem is that, in the twentieth century, almost all the great Islamic dynasties stood accused either of financial collapse or collusion with the colonizer. Yet to reject this political literature along with the men who so imperfectly embodied it is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. The Nahda reformism, that major movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which, thanks to the Arab revolutions, is now being rediscovered, included conservative as well as liberal tendencies, raising the question of whether thoroughgoing reform was in fact required

² Jocelyne Dakhlia, “Islam et nationalisme: la fin des États de grâce,” *Le Genre humain*, n° 23, May 1991, p. 19-32; “Démocratie au Maghreb: rêves d’un âge d’or perdu?,” *Le Genre humain*, n° 26, Autumn-Winter 1993, p. 49-59; See, too, “Les miroirs des princes islamiques: une modernité sourde,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, n° 5, 2002, p. 1191-1207.

to resist Western colonial pressure. The framework that historically prevailed over these currents was that of the Westernization of law, political models, and so on. Its effect was to condemn to oblivion such political principles as equity and redistribution, for example, which were the cornerstones of the longstanding form of secular wisdom known as sultanic culture. Also forgotten is the old way of conceiving the relationship between the prince and his people. Like all “pre-contemporary” political thought—if I can use this teleological formulation—sultanic culture was always elitist. The elite were always distinguished from the people. When allegiance was declared to a new sovereign, there was always a difference between the primary allegiance of the elite and the more general allegiance of the people. These Islamic regimes did not invent universal suffrage, which, in any case, is only of very recent vintage, even in democratic societies. Yet even so, one finds in this political literature and these practices a concept of the people that deserves to be studied and ultimately reclaimed. Tunisia is, at present, learning the practice of universal suffrage, resulting in electoral experiences that can be difficult and painful due to the uncertainty and turmoil they entail. I think it is important to show that in medieval and early modern political literature, as well as in the genre of the chronicle, there was a distinct concern for ordinary people and a quite egalitarian vision of the sultan’s subjects. Indeed, one finds, in this literature, in a stereotyped but recurring way, a hyperbolic presentation of the destitute subject, who has nowhere else to turn but the state, which defends not only his property, but also his honor. The recurrent motif is that of the poor, elderly, and sick subject who is seeking justice. The old man whose only livelihood is his donkey and the old woman without a family are subjects for whom justice is to be found only in the state and a fair monarch. There is something about this idea that is essential for constructing democracy in the present, on the basis of endogenous resources rather than ones that have been imported or transposed.

Islam’s entire political history can, of course, be interpreted as examples of relationships of personal dependence or clientelism, which are now generally stigmatized. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) and other medieval (and even later) writers were often literate courtiers (I use the plural as they often traveled from court to court). The question of clientelism and personal protection played an essential role in the Muslim world, just as it did in all court societies, in Europe and beyond. In this respect, clientelism is not specific to the Islamic world, which is so often associated with nepotism and corruption. But in sultanic thought there very much exists a conception of the public good and a distinctive vision of the state’s role. It would be useful to explore this political realm more closely. For example, the famous chronicler Tabari (839-923) tells the story of the good caliph Omar ibn Abdelaziz (682-720) who, when he took a break from balancing his account books to chat with his secretary, turned off the lights so as not to waste the taxpayer’s money. While these edifying examples might seem insignificant, I feel that it is my duty, as an historian, to call attention to this literature. The point, needless to say, is not to reinvent democracy with a language that is entirely specific to and completely originating from the Islamic world. We must, however, abandon the idea that democracy is a Western invention, which must be merely transposed or dropped onto Muslim societies. To the contrary, we must show that there are convergences, as well as historical and ideological capital, which make it possible to appreciate and revive this potentially democratic legacy from within the Islamic world.

Books & Ideas: Among the clichés about oriental despotism, there is, of course, the image of the impulsive sovereign, the irrational oriental despot who is a slave to his own passions. Rather than

avoiding this theme, you address it up front in *L'Empire des passions*. You show, in contrast to orientalist perspectives, the logic of affects, friendship, and interpersonal closeness in the ways in which sultanic power has operated since the ninth century. Should this work be seen as an extension of your civic and political engagements?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: Earlier I was saying that, paradoxically, the orientalism debate did not shape my work, as my primary interest was in exchanging ideas with my Maghrebin friends and colleagues and because the polemic over Saïd—strange though this might sound today—received little attention in Maghrebin universities. In a way, I wanted to work for Tunisia, though it may seem nationalistic to say so. In the final decade of the twentieth century, as a result of Algeria's civil war and the first Gulf War, a kind of political despair prevailed. I wanted to reconcile those who were anchored in Arab and Islamic history with their history and to reconcile them with their own conceptions of themselves and their own political heritage. This desire was further exacerbated by the tensions in France relating to what became known, at the time, as the headscarf affair. When I began there was considerable theoretical and methodological inequality, as French historians and the Annales School set the tone not only for the Maghreb, but also for the rest of Europe and the United States. At the time, French history was in a position of theoretical and methodological domination, and imposed itself everywhere. This situation did not seem inherently scandalous, but I wanted the dignity of a specifically Arab historical terrain to be recognized. I also wanted to familiarize the profession with historical examples from the Arab world, so that they would not be relegated to a history that was seen as ineffable and distinct. To do so, this distinctness had to be dismantled and dissolved. Then, in the wake of all the tensions resulting from the first Gulf War, with all the racism that emerged at that time—including in intellectual circles—and with Islamophobia on the rise, my concern was no longer to reconcile French and Arab intellectuals, but to work, however modestly, to dispel historiographical prejudices and to promote for the intellectual enhancement of readers I presumed were primarily from the Maghreb. It was important, more generally, to arrive at a less negative conception of the Islamic world's political dynamics. It had to be shown that they had their own logic and coherence and that neither primal, baseless despotism, nor destructive emotion, were the key to everything.

The purpose of *L'Empire des passions* was thus to examine what lay behind a few major political crises that had been tagged as “affective,” to identify their similarities—because these same “cultural contours,” marked by the repetition of the same stories and the recurrence of the same motifs—but also to see how stories about crisis, instability, and dramatic endings, could, to the contrary, be seen by Westerners as expressing structural and timeless characteristics. Consider, for example, Harun al-Rachid's (763-809) massacre of the Barmakid viziers in 803. At the center of this partly legendary and romantic story lies the triangular relationship between the sultan, his sister, and his vizier, who was also his commensal, friend, and lover. Beyond its anecdotal character, the story demonstrates how gender and sexuality became intertwined with politics, as a way of explaining how politics could be so tumultuous. In particular, it evokes the motif of the caliph whose dependence on his vizier is passionate and loving. Many similar motifs can be found elsewhere in the Islamic world at different periods. For example, Suleiman the Magnificent's bloody, sudden, and brutal execution of his vizier, friend, and bosom buddy Ibrahim (c. 1494-1546) is, from the Western standpoint, very surprising. I have tried to understand the meaning of these moments of political rupture, when the balance of power shifts

as sultanic authority seeks to reinvigorate itself through a new relationship of trust with its subjects. This was, in particular, made possible by the fact that these governments relied on bureaucracies whose members are typically allogeneic and mercenary. Consequently, they could be brutally dismissed if a sultan needed to send a political message or reconfigure his political personnel. The fact that broad similarities can be found in different situations does not, however, imply absolute identity. The mercenary system that Ernst Gellner calls the “Mamluk principle” can be found throughout the Islamic world, but always in differing degrees and never in a pure form; local elites were always represented in the state apparatus, even in the Ottoman Empire. The principle of a meritocratic mercenary organization could, moreover, if it became too extensive, undermine power in another way. If one gave too much importance to prominent local families, the reigning dynasty ran the risk of being overtaken and overthrown by one of these families. This is what happened in the well-known cases in which viziers were mayors of the palace before becoming caliphs or sultans. In giving too much importance to these allogeneic elements, one risks provoking a palace revolution and losing power. It is, in short, a question of balance, though palace revolutions are, statistically speaking, no more common in the Islamic world than in Western Europe. The Ottoman dynasty, in particular, offers a good example of longevity, as it lasted from the fifteenth century until the early twentieth century.

Europe and Islam: A History of Exchange and Conflict

Books & Ideas: In your early books, Europe is always present in your analysis of Islamic power, though primarily from a comparative angle. Since the 2000s, however, you have grown increasingly interested in the relationships and connections that both unite and divide Europe and Islam. In this respect, your work *Lingua Franca* signals a new approach, which seeks to reflect simultaneously on the relationships and conflicts existing in the Mediterranean world.

Jocelyne Dakhlia: This can be explained by two factors: first, my own internal and personal trajectory; second, the broader evolution of historiography. The question of Europe’s presence was already raised in *L’Empire des passions*. While closely examining Islamic court life, I encountered a large number of Christians. Their presence and their role in political institutions interested me greatly, particularly the question (which remains relevant today) of whether they brought with them European political ideas (what might have they known, for example, about Jean Bodin’s thought?). It was a question I could not answer, but I wanted to know whether all these political figures were in fact contemporaries who at the same time period shared the same conceptions of power, due to the fact that Christians were constantly passing through and joining these Islamic courts. Gradually, it struck me as inconceivable that there could be no reciprocity, no corresponding contribution on the part of Islam to European thought. These were the questions that led me to become interested in the spoken languages of the Islamic world and the Mediterranean, to exchanges between societies. The idea of a “lingua franca” can be easily gleaned from the sources, but always as something that was virtually self-evident. Many historians referred to it by writing that such-and-such a group “must have used the lingua franca.” Historians knew what it was without ever examining what it meant in concrete terms.

As I saw it, this lingua franca was a kind of Romance language. It had a Latin or European character, which was integral to the history of Maghrebin societies, but which, due to nationalism, was forgotten in the wake of decolonization. It seemed a shame, to me, that these

societies had cut themselves off from their Roman legacy. I was not the only one to adopt this approach, as it intersected with a contemporary movement in Maghrebin historiography to rehabilitate all the “renegades”—those who, in the early modern period, had recently converted to Islam and who in particular joined the Muslim political apparatuses. It was an approach of “Mediterraneanist” openness, which gladly portrayed Islamic societies as tolerant and protective of non-Muslims. There was a kind of official defense, including in Turkey, of this form of openness and tolerance that was dubbed the “mosaic” or “multicultural society.”

Books & Ideas: So this work could have a political goal?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: It is true that Ben Ali and the King of Morocco made use of this notion, particularly by emphasizing Maghrebin Judaism. It emerged at a time when the European Union was closing itself to the southern Mediterranean, notably through visa restrictions. Against fortress Europe, the Maghreb’s leaders projected an image of an open and tolerant region. But for an historian, it is impossible to overlook the conflictual dimension of these exchanges. The important thing about my earlier work on language had been to rediscover the influence of Romance languages on Arabic, which quite fascinated me and which I like very much. Then, as things became more difficult in France and Europe (particularly after 9/11), I wanted to add a new twist to my work on lingua franca. I wanted to show that, despite geopolitical tensions, there were always confirmed examples of rapprochement, familiarity, interaction, commerce, exchange, and mutual understanding that arose from these conflicts themselves. Exchange and conflict are two profoundly connected facets of the same processes, as can be seen in slavery, experiences of captivity, and the most violent of tales. I wanted to show that these worlds were closely intertwined, thanks to a common language. It was, of course, a language of rapprochement, but not at all a universal language, as it could be used precisely to establish difference and distance. A lingua franca can be a powerful marker of otherness. By using it, even as you speak or do business together, as you benefit from this language—even, perhaps, if you sleep together—you remain in relationship that is deeply imprinted with otherness.

Books & Ideas: The works you subsequently co-edited developed this analysis by studying the Muslim presence in Europe, as well as the upheaval resulting from these encounters and contact. What image of the Mediterranean does this leave us with? Is it a kind of transitional space, a site of circulation and exchange comparable to the Atlantic and Indian Oceans?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: I would first answer that one can’t do history alone. As I said before, the historiographical landscape has changed a great deal in the last few years, which has been a very good thing. For the past ten years or so, we have no longer been in a situation in which French and European historiographical models dominate. Thanks to such frameworks as the provincialization of Europe, connected history, and world history, we have achieved a more balanced conception of the world, which no longer creates the impression that the historical dynamic is primarily Euro-American. This makes possible a far more balanced conception of the Mediterranean itself. Frameworks based on the idea of decline, for example, have now mostly lost credibility. Thus the historiography of the Ottoman Empire has strongly challenged the idea of Islamic decline—despite the fact that the idea is still widespread in public opinion, due in part to Bernard Lewis’s influence. According to this view, the reason the Islamic world was so thoroughly colonized was that it had dwindled and lost its vitality, refused to take the path to

modernity, failed to interest itself in Europe, lacked curiosity in other cultures, and resisted learning European languages. These claims can be fully refuted if one notes that while these languages may not have been learned in their scholarly or written form, there was considerable practical and empirical knowledge of European languages. We are in the process of completely changing our historical models, and are beginning to recognize the basic equality of all historical processes—a trend that I seek both to support and to illustrate.

How, then, should we think of the Mediterranean? It is dangerous, I think, to apply models based on the discovery of America to the Mediterranean context. These models go back to Tzvetan Todorov's work on the discovery of America and the shock of otherness.³ In a short recent text, I tried to show how the study of the conquest of Algeria in 1830 has been modeled on the conquest of America—the shock of the other—despite the fact that French and Algerian society had, for centuries, lived in a relationship of mutual knowledge and familiarity.⁴ If there was a shock, it had to do with violence, the reversal of power relations, and alienation, but certainly not with discovery. It is on this basis that I tried, with several other colleagues, to build Muslim history from within European history. These are simply the blueprints of a history that is yet to be written. We have only provided it a few guidelines and starting points.

Moreover, I also have a problem with the emphasis on and heroization of mediators. In situations of real and profound otherness, as in America, there is a need for negotiators, interpreters, and mediators. This was not the case in the Mediterranean, where many people speak the same languages and are in a position to serve as spontaneous negotiators. The instances of people who travel back and forth across the sea have often been underestimated. For instance, I often refer to the work of a Moroccan historian, Ahmed Boucharb, who studies the relationship between Morocco and Portugal. He shows that between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several tens of thousands of Moroccans (around 60,000, if my memory serves me correctly) moved to Portugal, either permanently or not (they often consisted of tribes who left during famines and political crises).⁵ All this exchange and displacement must be reevaluated—quantitatively as well as qualitatively—in a way that goes beyond mere comparison. Yes, there are important examples of mediation—Leo Africanus⁶ (1490?-1550?) is not an invention! But what must be discovered, in my view, is just how commonplace such characters were. The heroization of mediators always brings us back to ideas about the clash of civilizations, cultural distinction, and the opposition between coherent societies that are enclosed in their own cultural dynamics. In a spirit of generosity—and to justify historical circulation—historians are tempted to explain how, from one civilization to another, there are cultural negotiators and middlemen who span multiple civilizations, thoroughly mastering their codes and translating between them. This is exactly what bothers me: when we think in terms of mediation, we make these societies static and

³ Tzvetan Todorov, *La Conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'Autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.

⁴ Jocelyne Dakhlia, "1830, une rencontre?," in Abderrahmane Bouchène, Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, Ouanassa Siari Tengour, and Sylvie Thénault, eds., *Histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale*, Paris, La Découverte; Algiers, Barzakh Editions, 2012, p 142-149.

⁵ Ahmed Boucharb, *Les Crypto-musulmans d'origine marocaine et la société portugaise au XVIe siècle*, Ph.D., thesis, Université de Montpellier, 1987 (published in Arabic by Presses de l'Université de Rabat, 1996, and in Portuguese in Lisbon, 2004).

⁶ On the destiny of Leo Africanus, formerly known as Hassan al-Wazzan, the Moroccan nobleman who converted to Christianity in Rome after being captured at sea by Christian pirates, see Natalie Zemon Davis's exhaustive study, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds*, New York, Hill & Wang, 2006.

immobile. This idea of stasis, in which change and mobility are reserved for a few middlemen, proves particularly significant for Islamic societies. First, because they are more often accused of being passive, with everything we have been saying about decline in the background. And who are the one praised for being mediators or negotiators? More often than not, religious minorities. Thus as in the late sixties, we find a pattern, in which modernity's middlemen, society's most dynamic elements, are the Jewish minority, eastern Christians, Greeks, Armenians, Maronites, and so on. This makes it all the easier to lock Muslims into assumptions about tradition and their attachment to all that is static and immobile. Yet when I worked with my colleagues were working on Muslims in European history, we realized that the best known middlemen (like literate Maronites and Armenians, who were cultural middleman and translators of texts) were also Muslim, albeit in a more anonymous and discrete way.

The Mediterranean: A Continuum

Books & Ideas: Whether you are speaking as a French or Tunisian historian, one sometimes has the impression that, in the course of a conversation, the “you” that you speak of refers to different membership communities, national as well as professional. Without in any way asking you to situate or justify yourself, what conclusions can be drawn from this ambivalence?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: In recent decades, binationals throughout the world have become collectively aware of the fact that one can have a perfectly legitimate identity as a dual national (and while sharing in two civic and political communities). This situation, in which dual and triple nationalities have become legitimate, is new and unprecedented; a fluid “we” has become possible. But I have always experienced my situation in France in terms of a kind of debt owed to Tunisia and the Maghreb. I still like I've only just arrived in France—because I actually left home rather late, at the age of eighteen, to do my studies. This was, in a sense, the price one had to pay if one wanted to be in a position to work for Tunisia. I experienced it that way. I feel a bit ashamed to say this now, as it probably seems a bit naïve, but I believe it was absolutely sincere. Hence this “we” which I do, indeed, use from time to time. This “we” could also be a retreat, as when, in the nineties, I no longer recognized myself in narrowly French debates, including those taking place at the academic or university level. As scholars of the Arab and Islamic world, we were confined to a kind of academic ghetto. Whatever work on the Muslim world was surrounded by disinterest and defiance. We were confined to a predetermined specificity.

This moment of rupture began, as I mentioned, with the first Gulf War and reached a crescendo, more or less, with 9/11 and the success of Samuel Huntington's thesis concerning the “clash of civilizations.” Afterwards, the climate began to improve, at least intellectually. Perhaps there was greater self-consciousness about the use of highly reductive models? Or the fact that we lacked adequate cognitive tools? There was a notable renewal of interest in the Muslim world, as well as a new audience, an audience of young people with greater empathy, who were trying harder to understand. For my part, I was encouraged, particularly by my students, to give research in the social sciences a more civic orientation. I felt this to be a kind of duty. I had the sense that one could not work and say things about the Arab and Muslim world in the same way you can about other issues. A form of civic and ethical duty resulted from the impact that any demonstration about Islam could have. *Islamicités* (2005), which presents a version of my vision of the

Mediterranean and *lingua franca*, was not conceived as a scholarly work so much as a contribution to civic debates. After 2001, in seminars, students interested in the Islamic world expressed how tired and indignant they felt about what they heard on Islam and Muslims. They were angry at academics who, in their view, were reluctant to take sides and to react. I wrote this book, in part, for them. I tried, in a sense, to respond to the demand for more nuanced perspectives on the part of academics—something more than a position on the simplistic question of being “for” or “against” Islam—asking questions differently. But *Islamicités* is the book that I had the most difficulty publishing. Though it did have an impact in other countries, it met with almost no response in France, where, significantly, arguments that are nuanced because they are historical are rejected or frowned upon in such passionate contexts.

Books & Ideas: Listening to you, one gets the impression that the academic’s role is precisely to be a kind of middleman. Yet at the same time, you confess to not particularly liking this image of the mediator. Are academics simply the censors of what can be said on a particular topic, or do they have another, more specific role to play?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: I am not sure I understand what you mean by “censors.” It’s true that scholars (particularly those who work in “exotic” fields) are naturally inclined to reinforce—perhaps unconsciously—the specificity of their fields. As a friend of mine told me one day, you can’t say “I worked on people from equatorial Africa for twelve years, and have concluded that they are just like us.” A perverse effect of this work is to amplify and exaggerate difference. I believe that one of our responsibilities is to dispel this sense of difference. I do not mean that the Mediterranean is a homogenous world, that there is no difference between the north and the south and the east and the west. To the contrary, there are very notable differences between administrative systems, for example, or between political systems, which are tied to governmental factors that I mentioned earlier, relating to meritocracy or the use of mercenaries. But these differences between the north and south shore of the Mediterranean are not necessarily greater than those found within Europe, where one can find political and religious differences as well as other cleavages that are just as significant. Our role as scholars is thus to minimize these differences, to swim against the current of essentializing discourses on cultural difference, at a time when, as citizens, we find ourselves confronted with a system that increasingly favors culture as the explanation of the last resort. I think that we can also propose alternative definitions of culture and different visions of society, which would be more characterized by co-extensive relationships. This is my vision of the Mediterranean: coextensive relationships, but which do not mean that everything is possible and everything goes. There are bottlenecks and non-negotiable spaces, as well as continuums. And what matters most to me is precisely this notion of continuum.

Books & Ideas: The problem of the continuum of representations and practices lies, moreover, at the heart of the analysis you propose of the Tunisian Revolution in a recent book. In the eyes of Western commentators, this event seemed incomprehensible and unpredictable, due to the representations that helped to perpetuate a very old vision of Tunisian society’s immobility and shortcomings. What is your view of these events as well as the interpretation that has been proposed of them?

Jocelyne Dakhlia: With the Tunisian Revolution, there is no end to surprises. True, there was a moment of euphoria immediately after the revolution—a wonderful moment that must certainly not be disavowed—when it seemed like things could change at a moment’s notice. A kind of hidden political maturity was discovered, which suggested that how things were done could change overnight. And it is completely true that, at present, things are different in Tunisia, a fact that we should never forget whenever we feel discouraged. Whatever one might say, society has completely changed. It is no longer the same world: the degree of freedom of speech and thought is absolutely stunning, and can be found at every level of society. I wonder, incidentally, if the Tunisians are not reconnecting with a tradition of free speech, for which historical evidence exists. I don’t want to make the latter point too hastily, but I’m reminded of the many chronicles that recount audiences in which any subject could come to meet the prince and speak with complete freedom, without any intimidation. Many European observers also described these incidents, which still occur today, when not only the presidents and his ministers, but any member of parliament can be addressed in the street. Everyone must be able to account for their style of management: absolutely stunning similarities exist between practices evidenced in medieval and early modern sources.

Do not the current difficulties hark back to the ever recurring idea that Islamic societies are not destined to be democratic? It is, to be perfectly honest, rather astonishing to hear Tunisian intellectuals calling, in this day and age, for an enlightened despotism. Personally, I find it unbelievable. Yet I believe that the mistake that all of us have made is to believe that it suffices to transpose a fully loaded democratic system, one that has proved itself, when in fact something new is now being invented. We don’t know what it will be, and the new Tunisian constitution only gives us the very glimpse of an idea. Something is being created before our very eyes. Hence the difficulties and sluggishness of the process currently underway.

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