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The Hijacking of Algerian Identity

By Kheireddine Bekkai

Abstract

Over half a century after its independence from France, Algeria is still struggling with its identity. The long French colonial occupation left Algerians with many questions regarding their language, their history, and their overall sense of belonging. Algerian identity has been defined in various ways throughout the occupation and after the independence and is still being redefined at present. This article focuses on how the successive leaders in Algeria have dealt and are dealing with the issue of identity in the country. It will also narrate the steps that have been taken in order to fabricate and implement an Algerian identity, also shedding light on recent developments.

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Both French and post-independence Algerian rulers imposed a simplistic, narrow definition of identity on Algeria. These choices were dictated by ideologies associated with colonization and Pan-Arabism, marginalizing other key components of Algerian identity. In doing so, both the colonizer and the dictator were able to effectively maintain power in pitting cultural, linguistic, and ethnic facets of Algerian identity against the other. This strategy generated a certain complex vis-á-vis certain languages—especially, but not limited to, French. French is considered by Algerians to be the language of sciences and mathematics because of its past (and to an extent, current) prominence as the language of instruction of such subjects in the Algerian education system.[1] This perception is bolstered by the notion that there is a greater amount of information on the subjects available in French. This is to be compared with Arabic, which has consistently been taught and perceived as the language of philosophy and literature. Tamazight, for its part, was rarely taught until the late 1980s.

Government officials in Algeria have long pursued a unique policy in building a national unifying identity for their citi-

zens. This initiative began as a reaction to the long and bloody colonization Algeria suffered at the hands of the French, who invaded Algeria in July 1830 and declared it a French territory in 1848. In order to establish control over this vast land—a region nearly four times the size of the French mainland—the French authorities began sending tens of thousands of French citizens to Algeria with numerous incentives, including free swaths of fertile land and no taxes.

These events marked the start of fundamental change for Algeria: the birth of *L'Algérie Française*. The French authorities went to great lengths to engineer a new identity for the natives of this North African addition to their extensive empire. A major component of this strategy was to legally replace the local languages of Arabic and Tamazight, the latter of which is spoken by the native Amazigh community, with French. The French began to subject Algerians to the same practices that the rest of the citizens of the *Métrople* endured, even teaching them that their ancestors were French Gaulles. The term

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"Arab" became synonymous with uncultivated and barbaric and was systematically assigned a negative connotation. (The use of this term in a pejorative manner lingered long after the French departure; decades later, it still remains in use in Algeria. To describe a job poorly done, one would refer to it as an "Arab job".) The process undertaken by the French to replace the local culture, language, and customs constituted a prolonged, thorough effort to Francize the country. It did not succeed completely, though. One of the many facets of French Algeria's new identity was a hybrid language and culture consisting of French, European, Algerian Arabic, and Amazigh/Tamazight elements. The change was so dramatic that the current Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika stated that colonization resulted in the "genocide of identity, history, language, and traditions." He said further: "We no longer know whether we are Amazigh, Arabs, Europeans, or French."[2] In using "genocide," Bouteflika meant that France deliberately and systematically attempted to exterminate local Algerian culture in order to replace it with a foreign one.

Post-Independence Challenges

While there were many uprisings against French rule that took place throughout the colonization of Algeria, a particularly violent series of revolts began in 1954. French rule was finally dissolved in 1962. The newly independent Algeria was immediately faced with a multitude of challenges that were similarly overwhelming as the joy of freedom: in addition to the chaos produced by the rapid departure of hundreds of thousands of European settlers, Algerians had been left without experience in the handling of state affairs of the country, let alone one emerging as independent from colonial rule and as geographically large and culturally diverse as Algeria.

The new, youthful leaders of the country decided to remedy the challenges left behind by the colonizers with a type of shock therapy to achieve the re-Algerianization of the country. The first Algerian president post-independence, Ahmed Ben Bella, wanted to recover the Arabic dimension of Algerian language and culture as quickly as possible. He began to do so in 1963, just after independence.[3] This proved

insurmountable even for him: when he was invited to visit Egypt just after the independence at the behest of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ben Bella was unable to address his audience in Arabic, leaving him publicly "humiliated."[4] (Nasser was at the time the embodiment of Arabization and pan-Arabism.) In response to this and as part of his pan-Arabism initiative, Nasser sent droves of Arabic instructors to Algeria, an effort that ultimately also contributed to the rise of Islamism in Algeria as instructors infused the teaching of Arabic with the teaching of Islam.

What took place from the 1960s through the 1970s can only be described as an overzealous effort to purge Algeria of its French component and substitute it with what were perceived as entirely authentic Algerian elements—this, however, excluded the Amazigh identity for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was easier to reinforce Arabic in the atmosphere of pan-Arabist movements throughout the region; secondly, Amazigh was seen as a dividing element as opposed to a uniting one because it was thought to represent only a small minority of the country. Similarly, Tamazight was not perceived—especially by the authorities but also by the average Algerian—to have the same prestige or practical purposes as Arabic did. There was not a unified Amazigh movement that compared to the size of pan-Arabism, with the exception of a contained movement in the mountainous Kabyle region of northern Algeria.

One of the first initiatives of this purging of French identity was a renaming of the streets and main thoroughfares: emblematic squares and routes such as Place Bugeaud, rue D'Isly, and rue Michelet became Sahet Chouhada, rue Larbi Ben M'hidi, and rue Didouche Mourad—the latter names all symbolic not only of Algeria's Arabic heritage but also of the revolution and the Algerian resistance to the French. Soon after, schools, universities, and government offices were ordered to begin using Arabic for instruction and on all official correspondence.

Ben Bella was overthrown in 1965 and was succeeded by Houari Boumediene, an Arabist with an academic career that included stints at the prestigious Islamic institutions of Az-Ziytouna in Tunisia and Al-Azhar in Egypt. It was under Boumediene's rule that the process of Arabization, with the appointment of education minister Moustapha Lacheraf, was fully implemented.[5]

Bilingual Illiteracy

Schools in Algeria were given a short window of time of several years to comply with the government project of full Arabization. The generation going through the school system at this time was designated a "transitory class" or *classe transitoire*. Mathematics and the sciences were still taught in French, but history, geography, literature, and philosophy were to be instructed in Arabic. By the early 1980s, during the last generation of the transitory classes, anyone hoping for a successful future would not have opted for Arabic instruction. This was for the simple reason that French was still inherently valued by society and, consequently, in the academic and professional realms. An individual aspiring to become a doctor or engineer would be expected to be at least bilingual, and mastery of French was required in order to take high-level courses in high school and university.

By the mid-1980s, Algerian schools celebrated the switch to full Arabic instruction. The authorities boasted about this great "achievement" but did so avoiding the subject of the quality and competence of this new generation of youth. The new school system was christened *al madrasa al asasiyya* or the "Fundamental School." The Algerian population used a perversion of the French version, *L'école fondamentale,* partially Arabizing it to create the term

"*fawdha mentale*" which, in the Algerian hybrid Arabic dialect, translates to "mental chaos." The general Algerian response to this new curriculum was to deem it a failed curriculum producing bilingual illiterates—in other words, generating youth who were unable to master either French or Arabic.

At the root of the failure were several factors: the process of Arabization was rushed and poorly planned, and it was not thoughtful of the complex, deeply rooted linguistic and cultural realties on the ground.[6] The first schools developed in this new period did not have textbooks or systems in place to replace what the French education system offered before. This made it more of a political measure than a substantial, carefully executed educational strategy. Similarly, there was a significant lack of qualified instructors and teaching material—while Egypt and other Arab countries continued to send Arabic teachers to Algeria, they often did not have teaching credentials at all, let alone in the instruction of the Arabic language. Algerian professors were untrained and unprepared for the sudden switch. This remained the case at all levels of the academic system until the early 1990s, except for a partially successful attempt to reform higher education. Even academic institutions that have high educational standards, such as the national Algerian Institute for Translation and Interpretation, would hire professors in translation who were incapable of speaking formal Arabic, despite the fact that students were expected to translate a multitude of languages into formal Arabic.

Algerian "Schizophonia"

The language spoken in Algeria today is known as Algerian Arabic. In reality, this constitutes a mix of Arabic, Tamazight, French, Spanish, and in some cases Turkish and/or Italian. This holds true especially in the major coastal cities such as Algiers, Ouahran, Constantine, and Annaba. Children are instructed from an early age that colloquial Arabic is improper and, in some cases, even vulgar; pupils are taught in formal Arabic and prevented from using any colloquial Arabic in the classroom.[7] Official correspondence is also supposed to be in formal Arabic in accordance with a law passed in 1997, although it is said that senior officials often receive a French translation alongside of the original, official Arabic copy. This is provided in order to ease the administrative process, due primarily to the lack of comprehension of formal Arabic and the relative fluency of Algerian officials in French. This inferiorization of the colloquial language that average Algerians use most of the time has major effects on the way in which Algerians perceive their own identity.

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Since Bouteflika came to power in 1999, he has altered the perception of identity yet again: going against the protocol of all of the presidents before him, Bouteflika is the first Algerian leader, post-independence, who is both capable of and confident in switching between formal Arabic, Algerian Arabic, and French with ease. In doing so, he has catered his language choice to his audience and encompassed all of them into his identity. In justifying his choice, after addressing the French parliament in French in 2012, he asked, "Why follow the protocol when we can make it easier and speak in a language that we both understand and

grasp?" He has also questioned the implementation of the Arabization process, even suggesting a return to teaching French at an early age in a bilingual teaching system. In fact, the current Minister of Education, Nouria Benghabrit-Remaoun, has been tasked with exploring the feasibility of this proposal as an educational reform, among other potential alterations to the education system.

Algerians continue to question their identity and struggle with accepting all of its dimensions. Unlike neighbors Tunisia and Morocco, Algeria continues to grapple with its two adopted languages of Arabic and French, as well as with its native language of Tamazight. The first of the three is used as an identity marker although it is not actively developed, as it is used to merely copy or directly translate from French. The second serves as a communication tool for practical purposes. Tamazight is rarely used outside of the Kabyle area, generally regionally contained and never used in an official setting. Arabic remains the national and official language of the country, as stated in the constitution. Its usage is confined to formal situations, such as official communication, education, the media, and in religious institutions. Just as it is elsewhere in the region, formal Arabic is not used in daily life and is not considered to be the mother tongue. French, on the other hand, has been seen by many as what Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine, a prominent figure of the Amazigh cause and a critic of Arabization as it was enforced in the Algerian context, has deemed a "war bounty." In other words, a language that served as a weapon against the colonizer and as a tool with which to climb the social ladder. French also served the Amazigh and the feminist movements in their respective struggles for an official recognition. Although it is counted among the largest francophone countries in the world in terms of the number of French speakers, Algeria has refused to join the International Organization of the Francophonie, which is still perceived by the establishment as a neocolonial tool.[8]

The other major component of the Algerian linguistic identity, Tamazight, was excluded from any formal or national recognition until 2002, and then only after many violent protests.[9] In April 1980, for example, the Algerian army was purported to have killed at least thirty-two people demonstrating for the official recognition of the Amazigh.[10] The Algerian linguistic landscape resembles that of its western neighbor, Morocco, representing a patchwork of an Amazigh population on which Arabic and French have been imposed, either for religious/postcolonial purposes in the case of Arabic, or for practical reasons of social mobility in the case of French at various points throughout Algeria's history.[11]

Proud To Be Algerian

Overall, the process of postcolonial Arabization in Algeria has been a chaotic one, and many generations of citizens have paid the price for it: rushed, poorly planned, and politicized are among the many adjectives Algerians have used to describe the process.[12] That said, there are signs that Algerian leaders and intellectuals may have learned several valuable lessons from this failure: they are slowly but surely learning to accept and include the many languages spoken by Algerians. An additional lesson learned is that significantly more effort should be placed on the development of Arabic as a language used outside of the traditional realms of literature and social sciences; there is discussion of improving its use in the technical realms of mathematics and sciences. There is also some discussion about the extent of the "sacredness" of the language.[13]

The only component that is absent in this linguistic and cultural equation is the

native Amazigh heritage. Despite the fact that Tamazight was recently recognized as a national language in 2002, it lacks the interest that formal Arabic and French command from the general population for practical reasons.[14] In other words, if one masters Arabic or French, they will often be more likely to get a job. However, the situation of the Amazigh movement and the fight for Tamazight recognition appears to have changed, at least on the surface. Tamazight has legal status and is finally recognized as a national language. Legislators are discussing ranking it equally with Arabic to become the second national and official language of the country.

After more than half a century of independence, Algerians continue to struggle with their cultural identity. In the 1940s, Abdelhamid Ben Badis, an Algerian religious and political figure, wrote an anthem that children in Algeria are still asked to memorize by heart: "The Algerian population is Muslim and belongs to the Arab world."[15] Today, intellectuals, politicians, and average citizens alike are challenging this definition. As author Kamel Daoud stated in response to a French journalist's question of whether he felt Arab, "No, I am not. I am Algerian and proud."

Kheireddine Bekkai holds an MA in the instruction of French as a foreign language from La Sorbonne in Paris, France. He also holds two BAs, one in applied foreign languages with a focus on Arabic, French, and German and the other in translation and interpretation in Arabic, French, and German. Since his arrival in the United States in 2000, Mr. Bekkai has been teaching French and Arabic courses in language, translation, literature, and culture. He is particularly active with NGOs and has participated in several interfaith outreach committees. Mr. Bekkai also works with a French heritage language and culture program and serves as president of the New England chapter of a French expatriate organization. Since joining the faculty at Boston University, Mr. Bekkai has been a panelist and moderator in many panel discussions and talks hosted by local organizations regarding the issues of identity and immigration. He is also interested in media studies, journalism, and international relations, particularly as it pertains to the dialogue between Western societies and the Arab world.

Endnotes

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