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Ramzi Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers. History and Ideology in the Maghrib*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 312 pp. Bibliography and index. \$79.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780812251302.

Response by Ramzi Rouighi, University of Southern California.

Any historical study must develop a critical approach to the archive on which it stands. For the medieval Maghrib, the archive is written predominantly, but not exclusively, in Arabic. *Inventing the Berbers* is an attempt to chart the salient features of a specific medieval archive and to identify those practices and assumptions that shaped the writing of what historians think of as the evidence. Among other things, my study shows that the anachronistic projection of modern notions about collective identities and territorialized homelands reduces and distorts the richness and complexity of the sources.

Any study of medieval social formations and ideologies in the Maghrib confronts the Arabic discourse on the Berbers (Berberization) as a major challenge. Assessing the potential impact of this ideological process on arguments historians make about the medieval past is an important, if usual, step. That is why my book begins with the emergence of Berberization and documents its evolution over time (part one). After that, the book turns its attention to two aspects of medieval Arabic writings: the science of genealogy and what modern scholars have dubbed ethno-geographic knowledge (discussed in part two). In the last part of the book (part three), my book analyzes a few modern works whose impact on the study of the medieval Maghrib requires attention. Among these, the partial translation of Ibn Khaldun's magnum opus in French in the mid-nineteenth century stands out because it came to determine the medievalists' interpretation of not just Ibn Khaldun's fourteenth century, but the entire medieval period, one anachronism on top of another, made possible through the operations of modern discourses on race, religion, and the nation. In this regard, my work builds on Abdelmajid Hannoum's seminal work on the impact of Ibn Khaldun's translation on the French colonial imaginary.[1]

Instead of denying the existence of Berbers, an altogether unproductive endeavor, *Inventing the Berbers* documents it, noting that before there was a discourse in Arabic on the Berbers, there were other ones on a variety of other groups, Yves Modéran's excellent study on the Moors (Mauri) offering a great example of that.[2] Secondly, the title of my book highlights the practice among specialists of the ancient period of using the medieval category "Berber," an anachronism that occults the emergence of the category in time, and misleads some into seeing greater continuity than is perhaps warranted.

The reviewer wonders: “How could one, then, understand the cooptation of this epithet as a rallying cry for Imazighen (the term that Berbers use today to refer to themselves) to oppose repressive regimes in the twentieth century?” Although the question may be telling of the reviewer’s interests and preoccupations, it is simply not the concern of this medievalist who has nonetheless cautioned against “the instrumentalization of history” and its “deleterious effects” on the field (p. 190). However, because in recent years, “Amazigh” has come to replace “Berber” in the work of some medievalists (p. 189), I pointed this out, but remain unconvinced that casting dynasties and kings as Amazigh, rather than Berber, undoes the hold that dynastic ideology, relayed by the modern discourse on the nation and its heroes, has on the overall explanatory framework. My objection is principally to the anachronism inherent in this modern usage of the category Amazigh in the study of the medieval period.

The reviewer also states: “[Rouighi] writes about ‘the involvement of Israel...in supporting secessionist Berberist parties’ (p. 196). These unsubstantiated claims only perpetuate familiar, vicious, and dangerous clichés about Berbers.” According to the Wikipedia entry on “Ferhat Mehenni,” the leader of the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabilya (MAK), “in 2012, Mehenni assumed a controversial position by visiting Israel where he voiced his support for and solidarity with Israel, comparing it to Kabylia: ‘We are in a hostile environment. Both countries share kind of the same path, but Israel already exists – that’s the only difference.’” For me, Mehenni’s visit to Israel illustrates the complexity of contemporary politics and points to a variety of sites of modern Berberization. However, reference to the actions of this one politician does little to impugn the commitment of other activists to a decolonial approach or to the struggle against settler colonialism. Of course, when political actions intrude on the work of medievalists, they must be acknowledged and accounted for, no matter their origin.

The reviewer states: “As Rouighi claims in the opening of his book, his focus is not ‘on what happened to the Berbers’ (p. 9). Well, maybe it should have been, at least a little.” Here is the fuller passage: “This book is not a history of the Berbers. The focus here is not what happened to the Berbers but rather on how it became possible to think that something happened to Berbers in the first place.” The reviewer continues: “At the conclusion of his book, Rouighi pronounces his ultimate objective: ‘This book has sought to establish Berberization as an object of historical study’ (p. 192). Yet, for someone so indebted to a Pan-Arabist historical project, and with so little interest in the Berbers’ own terms and perspectives, one has to wonder about the motivation behind this book.” If, despite my repeated caution against the intrusion of nationalist ideology in historical research, it is still possible for the reviewer to see my work as “a Pan-Arabist historical project,” and if, in spite of the book’s lengthy exposition on the difference between the later medieval Ibn Khaldun and the colonial one, the reviewer can consider that “Ibn Khaldun had more sense and wisdom [than Rouighi] when he identified connections, continuity, and permanence among the peoples he called Berbers,” then there is little left to say, for, to paraphrase my favorite historian, it is difficult to lift a table while standing on it.

NOTES

[1] Abdelmajid Hannoum, “Translation and the Colonial Imaginary: Ibn Khaldûn Orientalist,” *History and Theory* 42/1 (2003): 61-81.

[2] Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l’Afrique romaine IVe-VIe siècle* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2003).

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