



HAL
open science

Some problems in the Shaping of the Mediterranean Cultural Area

Gilles Boëtsch, Jean-Noël Ferrié

► **To cite this version:**

Gilles Boëtsch, Jean-Noël Ferrié. Some problems in the Shaping of the Mediterranean Cultural Area. Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, Aug 1996, Utrecht, Netherlands. hal-02553997

HAL Id: hal-02553997

<https://hal.science/hal-02553997>

Submitted on 24 Apr 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Boëtsch G., Ferrié J.N. Some problems in the Shaping of the Mediterranean Cultural Area. In, Brinkhuis, Frank and Talmor, Sascha (eds.) *Memory, History and Critique: European Identity at the Millennium*. Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (1996), at the University for Humanist Studies, Utrecht. *Memory, History and Critique: European Identity at the Millennium Utrecht: The Netherlands*, International Society for the Study of European Ideas/ University for Humanist Studies.

Some problems in the Shaping of the Mediterranean Cultural Area

Gilles Boëtsch

CNRS /Université de la Méditerranée (Marseille)

Jean-Noel Ferrié

CEDEJ-URA 1165 of the CNRS (Cairo)

In previous works, we have already developed the concept of diachronic comparatism in order to point out the error that consists of superficially comparing facts present and facts past (Ferrié, 1993a; Ferrié et Boëtsch, 1992a). To begin with, diachronic comparatism gives substance to the idea according to which some cultural and social communities are stable in both time and space. By so doing, it systematically confuses analogy and identity (Ferrié, 1993b). Finally, it desocializes beliefs and observances, i.e., it deals with them as substantive realities, regardless of the social contexts within which they have become inserted. This error is the direct result of flattening up the dimension of time introduced by the very idea of comparing similar things in time: the comparison is only possible if we were to consider that time does not change their meaning nor their relevance. We are dealing here with a static concept of culture, the latter being treated more as an object than as a matter of communication. This reification has led anthropology into many an error: racial classification of human groups, the culturalist concept of culture and the mixture of both as represented by the notion of ethnic groups, a falsely humanistic notion which claims to be respectful of specificities. Despite wise criticism (Amselle, 1990), such errors continue to make it difficult to adopt a serene approach to culture, in other words, an approach mindful of flows and of circulation rather than of membership or belonging to stable entities. The insistence at present on defining the Mediterranean space as a cultural entity geographically located in the Mediterranean is a striking example.

We believe, in fact, that the notion of a Mediterranean space is not self-evident, nor is the vague notion of "Mediterranean" when used to designate a collective identity or, at least, a particular closeness between the inhabitants of both shores as being "Mediterraneans". As a matter of fact, these notions seem more relevant to a political system, in the wide sense of the

word. What we mean by that is - according to an idea advanced by Susan Ossman (to be published) - that ancient and contemporary political geography serves as a background for the establishment of the Mediterranean cultural space. The origin of such practice can be found in the literature devoted to the ethnography of the Maghreb during the colonial era. According to an interpretation proposed by us (Ferrié et Boëtsch, 1992a), we shall attempt to show how the setting-up of a Mediterranean space was based on a cartographic logic, over-valuing cultural facts and under-valuing contemporary history. Diachronic comparatism has been and remains the instrument of this double error of valuing; its main argument is based on survivals; as for diffusionism, which is harshly criticized, it has nothing to do with these errors.

Survivals, Resistance and Territory

The main way of establishing a continuity between the two shores of the Mediterranean consisted of seeking among the Berbers survivals of pre-Islamic behaviors, common to other Mediterranean societies that go further back in time. By taking an interest in survivals, it becomes relatively easy to envisage a Mediterranean world that was once united and that remains the repository of a common civilization. But this unitarian myth does have its rather unpleasant counterparts. They are the consequences of diachronic comparatism and they are mainly related to the definition of cultural identity. We know now - at least when we speak as anthropologists - that identities are built up interactively in situations of contact, in other words we know that identities are not substantial (Barth, 1969). Yet, diachronic comparatism stems from a substantialist concept of identity and, what is worse, it pretends with much ease that it is natural. Let us take two examples related to the Touarges.

In the Eastern Lybians, Bates (1970) uses 29 times ethnographic facts concerning the Touarges reported by Duveyrier in describing the customs of ancient Lybians. The following year, in his Ancient History of North Africa, Gsell does the same, using contemporary descriptions of the Touarges in order to describe antiquity (Gsell, 1920, 1929)¹. The danger of such a method is obvious: it suggests that the Touaregs of today have not changed since ancient times, which leads one to think that: 1) they are, in a way, situated outside time or in a time past; 2) and that, if they do change, no longer remaining what they have always been, they become nothing.

In fact, diachronic comparatism considers that cultural traits constitute the transhistoric identity of peoples and that, like the skulls, they are stable elements of their classification as

¹ For example, Gsell (1920: 244-245; 1929: 125). These examples are given and placed in their context by Ferrié (1993a).

types. What gets lost, of course, is the link with the social history of symbols. Let us go no further. Diachronic comparatism takes it for an established fact that peoples exist and are only reduceable unto themselves, in other words, that their being is due to the intangibility of a symbolic system and a group of related practices established from the very beginning. In a sense, one can follow the trace of a people or a group of related peoples by studying the distribution of beliefs. According to these concepts, Mediterraneans exist because the same beliefs have survived on both sides of the Mediterranean.² In other words, the notion of survivals allows referral of beliefs and practices, not to a present interest, but to the trans-historical heritage of a population, recognizing the presence of cultural characteristics yet excluding them from the social dynamics; it permits doing what was, for a long time, the task of anthropology: to affirm that culture "*is the fundamental social phenomenon and that it culminated in the sacred*" (Bloom, 1987: 308). Survivals are an old idea of the history of religions (e.g. Eliade, 1963 : 197-232) and (unfortunately) of anthropology. They cannot be separated from notions of "superstition", "magic" (Belmont, 1979 : 54-55) nor from their disparaging substance which denotes an abnormal, extraordinary and excessive activity (ibid :57).

From the cartographic point of view mentioned early in this text, survivals allow for localizations. Throughout the XIXth century, migrations were considered important; physical anthropology specialized in studying them for quite some time, yet migrations only tell the story of the origin in order to give the status of a people once they stop migrating. They describe a settling down. On the other hand, peoples on the move are not appreciated. They have to settle down in a territory for them to be traceable as discreet entities with their own characteristics. Since cultures stem from the identity of peoples, they too must fit within a territory. It is thus to be noted that survivals, i.e., the remaining character of the cultural traits of a population, conferred upon culture a concept similar to that of the resistance of types dear to physical anthropologists, i.e., the certainty of the remaining character of somatic traits. The combination of survivals and resistance, so to speak, leads to a denial of the fact that human groups are subject to change. Unfortunately, the Berbers were subjected to such a denial. The most ridiculous example of the latter is given by Bertholon et Chantre; in *Recherches anthropologiques dans la Berbérie orientale, Tripolitaine, Tunisie, Algérie*. (1913) after defining the somatic types of this region, including Algeria, Tunisia and Tripolitania, they make them correspond to "tribes" described by the travelers of antiquity.³

What happens then when one wishes to establish a link between intangible and territorialized entities? It is difficult to adopt a performative attitude regarding them since the

2 This point of view is defended by Westermack (1935); also see Ferrie (1993b).

3 This matter is dealt with in Boëtsch et Ferrié (1989).

physical and bodily traits as well as their territorialization are all defined as being permanent. The very premises of the question make it impossible to solve it in that sense. Of course, we also have the hypothesis of acculturation and cross-breeding, but it is too alien for the rigid concepts we just mentioned to be taken into account. What remains to be done is to locate proximity as related to origin, i.e., to look at the map of territories in terms of peoples/cultures before the present state of affairs, to locate change at its origin, in other words, to take into account the contours of the map and not its territorial sub-divisions. This does not mean abandoning political geography. It is to be noted, for example, that the Mediterranean as a unit is always looked upon in relation to the expansion of the maritime empires of Crete, Greece, Asia Minor or the Roman Empire. Here, too, we are dealing with a selection: the back-drop of the map which allows one to envisage the unit is built up retrospectively, starting with the alleged origin of modern European civilization. Undeniably, to superimpose this political map on the Mediterranean basin allows it to look natural as was declared by David Kerzer: *"People subscribe to the 'Master Fiction' that the world is divided into a fixed number of mutually exclusive nations; they see these units as part of the nature of things, and assume an antiquity that the nations in fact lack."* (Kertzer, 1988 :6)⁴ At the same time, Mediterranean culture finds itself endowed with a natural space: that of the Mediterranean. But these superimpositions - natural space, political space, ethnic space and cultural space - are simply a myth. That is where Mediterranean comparatism becomes dangerous, for such superimposition is a subterfuge.

We shall now go back to this series of considerations by analyzing an article published in 1930 by Fernand Benoit in Revue anthropologique: "Survivances des civilisations méditerranéennes chez les Berbères". In this article, Benoit does not deal with all the survivals, he is interested in seasonal rites and, very specially, in one of them:

"The mystery of the rebirth of plants, as celebrated among a great number of Berber groups in the mountains, is known to us by the rather bad name of 'night of the error' [...] The night which should more scientifically be named the 'night of renewal', is different from the mysteries of antiquity, in the sense that its symbolism seems to have lost all eschatological significance." (Benoit, 1930 : 281).

The *"night of the error"* consists of a series of collective couplings, between various partners at the change of seasons, mostly in the fall. First, Benoit notices that analogy between this practice and the mysteries of Eleusis (ibid.); then he notices euphemized variations of the same practice among the Berbers. It concerns symbolic processions of the bride's dolls: in the Sous, *"maidens came out in a procession carrying a pole with horizontal arms draped in*

⁴ Also (if not mainly) see, Anderson (1983).

feminine garb" (ibid. : 282). then, quoted from Laoust (1920) we have cases where young boys and girls are united *"more or less symbolically"* in the village mosque (ibid.). Real marriages were supposed to follow such symbolic unions. He seeks other such descriptions among ancient authors, especially Nicholas of Damascus who purportedly mentions *"the night of the error"* among the Dapsolybians of South Tunisia (ibid. :283). Concerning the latter, he blames Bertholon (1898) for having linked those practices to the customs attributed by Strabon to the Amazons of the Caucasus (ibid., footnote 4). He then goes on to quote Leo the African, Moulieras, evokes the famous orgies of Beni Mahsen and comes back to the mysteries of Eleusis:

"The mystery of Eleusis ended in the morning with a rite which completes the explanation of the Greek night: the hyrophants, rekindling the dead torches, symbolically presented the ear of corn with the following words: 'The divine Brimo has given birth to Brimos'. Thus the night represented the sacred mystery , the stages of which were the ritual union, fertility and birth." (Benoit, 1930 : 286).

Having thus established the identity of "the night of the error" among the Berbers and the ancient Greeks, Benoit stretches the comparison to other parts of the Mediterranean, mainly in Spain and in Provence: *"A parallel development of rites, were it possible to prove, would provide additional support to the theory I advanced at the beginning, namely that Berber Africa has carried to us a milieu that goes back three centuries."* (ibid.: 287). He points out ceremonies comparable to "the night of the error" in certain mountainous areas of Provence and Dauphiné, which we come to know of from the Inquisitors of the Holy Office. According to him, these practices went back to (Cathar) Manicheism *"which had reflourished in Gaul [...] and mainly in the Alps from the XIth to the XVth century, it is also related to Valdism."* (ibid.: 288). Benoit then goes on to remark on the parallelism linking the mysteries of Eleusis, the "night of the error" among the Beni Mahsen and the nocturnal gatherings of the Vaudois:

"The Vaudois who presided over this mystery, in the house of one of the villagers where they met, put out the light and pronounced the ritual phrase: 'qui habet habeat' or 'teneat' - literal translation of a sentence heard in the case of the Beni Mahsen to signal the beginning of the orgy. It is unlikely that the Moroccan investigator was aware of the Inquisition trials of the Vaudois, also unlikely that the Inquisitors concerned knew the mysteries of Eleusis, that is why such parallels are indeed striking, even though one would not dare conclude that the 'nights of the Vaudois' are related to the agrarian mysteries of antiquity." (ibid. : 288-289).

To conclude, Fernand Benoit refers to practices which he judges to be similar to those of Provence, even though they do not imply any orgy:

"...the villagers, not satisfied with carrying in a procession the effigy of a saint whose strength stems from his agricultural virtues, they spend the night together in an oratory on the occasion of the procession."

Limits and diffusions in the Definition of the Mediterranean Space:

We have just seen how Fernand Benoit proceeded: he first establishes an analogy between observable present practices among the Berbers and between a given practice witnessed in antiquity; then he notes its extension and variants around the Mediterranean. He supports the hypothesis that night gatherings linked to agrarian cults are proper to the Mediterranean. It is to be noted, however, that he proceeds with much caution and many a reservation. He notes analogies, underlines the resemblance between contemporary facts and facts of antiquity, yet he never positively affirms a hypothesis as to their common origin, he adds : "*...one cannot but be struck by such parallelism, without daring to conclude...*"

If one were to compare this way of doing things to that of Bertholon who presented diffusionist theses, one would feel a certain satisfaction to begin with. There does exist a Mediterranean space because the same cultural traits are shared all around it, and to demonstrate the common origin of such traits does not help establish the fact. Fernand Benoit's view point is contemporary with an epistemological break that consisted of not necessarily confusing analogy and identity when studying the coastal societies of the Mediterranean, whereas until then this confusion existed as an off-shoot of physical anthropology that considered analogies among cultural traits to be the result of a common origin of the populations wherein those traits were found (Ferrié, 1994).

It is certainly commendable to abandon the strict linkage of people-culture, but Benoit's cautious and vague position is not satisfactory either, for the analogies still remain unexplained. With the exception of biases and errors in evaluating ethnographic facts, it is difficult to affirm the dissemination of a given practice without allowing for a process of diffusion, i.e., a common origin. Lacking a major lead, however, Benoit avoids any conclusion in this matter. Nevertheless, he does affirm such a hypothesis when he speaks of "*the mold of the classic world [...], this pre-Hellenic and pre-Roman civilization of the peoples of Aegea and Crete*". (Benoit, 1930 : 279) and when he speaks of the mysteries of Eleusis. Obviously, that is where diachronic comparatism introduces an idea as to the origin. That is when one sees that the origin of the local is always local, even if we are dealing with a local extended in both space and time. The cartographic frame is widened but there is an avoidance of any reframing. Is it certain, however, that "night gatherings" can serve to demonstrate Mediterranean unity? Benoit mentions events told by the Inquisitors as having taken place in the Alps and the Dauphiné; those events - night gatherings followed by orgies - are, however, also said to have taken place in Europe, away from the Mediterranean zone. Carlo Ginzburg has just shown that their geography implies a rather different framework, since those events are found to have taken place in Northern and Eastern Europe and even in Siberia (Ginzburg, 1992). Of course, one may disagree with one part or the other of Ginzburg's thesis; the latter shows, however, that there is

another way of looking at the geographic distribution of "night gatherings", one that is not centered in the Mediterranean basin. If one were to trace Benoit's bibliography (e.g. Dollingen, 1890), one is entitled to query his ignorance of the European distribution of "nocturnal gatherings". But those gatherings, like many other allegedly Mediterranean facts - the evil eye or man's honor being jeopardized by the woman's shame, for example - are only Mediterranean because the rest of the map locating them was cut out. To put it differently, they are Mediterranean because the Mediterranean angle was favored above all other possible angles. In that sense, facts are over determined; undoubtedly, this is partly explainable by the social set-up of the Greco-Latin origin of Europe, an origin under-running all Mediterranean comparisons, at least up to the point when Anglo-Saxon social anthropology takes an interest in it.

We have just mentioned other exaggerated angles such as the evil eye - which is also to be found in East Africa and India - or men's honour jeopardized by women's shame. One could also mention revenge and family tales : Shakespeare's dramas (other than the ones situated in Italy) lead us to believe that such furors are not exclusively Mediterranean, nor is clientelism; it is probably possible also to compare Chinese or Vietnamese clientelism to Italian, Maltese or Moroccan clientelism. If we were to do the opposite, if we were to take these same traits without bothering to fit them into the Mediterranean basin, we might then have to extend the Mediterranean cultural space to include Latin America and a sizable part of the U.S.A. In fact we are not sure of our cultural maps nor of the identity of the distinctive traits we use to trace them; nothing shows that the superimpositions we resort to are anything but exaggerated view points influenced by the mythical way in which we build up our own identity

Mediterranean comparatism and comparisons with antiquity are as erroneous as they are attractive. It would seem, however, that today the idea of the Mediterranean is very much favored in French social sciences, even though its substance is not quite clear. Is it, for example, that the notion of Mediterranean allows our understanding of what Milano, Rome, Tunis, Athens, Tangier or Cairo have in common now? Also, whatever similarities exist, do they come from a common ancient culture or are they more simply, the workings of the same transnational culture - the latter not being exactly Mediterranean. Moreover, are not substantial identity and performative identity being mixed up? Does a cultural unity objectively exist outside its effective taking into account by the different societies claiming to be part thereof? The inhabitants of the Southern side do not describe themselves as being Mediterraneans, but as being "Arabs". It is mainly the European who speak of the Mediterraneans (or Moroccans when it has to do with relations with Europe), and this is not to be overlooked. The last disservice that can be rendered us by the notion of a Mediterranean is to prolong the common error of the meaning of common, as well as of the anthropological sense according to which the origin of a belief or practice carries significance. Beliefs, practices and symbols only have a sense through their being put to use. It has been said over and over again, then repeated very clearly by

Wittgenstein (1953 :128). If the Moroccans or the Egyptians do not define themselves as being Mediterraneans, they are not so; seeking their Mediterranean traits will not change anything. Moreover, this gives a wrong direction to the search for closeness between "them: and "us". We are situating them in things past and not things present; for example, in the sharing of the concept of honor and not in the shared viewing of "Dallas"⁵. By so doing, one gives the wrong impression that particularities and similarities are to be judged on the basis of shared "archaïsms" and not on the different utilization of the same modernity⁶.

A walk in Cairo will reveal that many of the facades in the centre of town remind us of Italy, but do the Caireens make the same comparisons? And is Casablanca a Mediterranean city or an Atlantic one? The impossibility of finding an adequate answer to such harmless questions seems to indicate that our idea of the Mediterranean is no more relevant than was our idea of the Orient.

⁵ On this particular point, see Abu-Loghud (1989).

⁶ Susan Rogers subtly develops this point of view in Rogers (1991: 207-214).

Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, L. 1989, "Bedouins, cassettes and technologies of public culture" *Middle East Report*, n° 159: 7-11.
- Amselle, J.-L. 1990, *Logiques métisses* (Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs). Paris: Payot.
- Anderson, B. 1983, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Londres: Verso.
- Barth, F. 1969, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Bates, O. 1970 (1912), *The Eastern Libyans, An Essay*. London: Franck Cass & Co.
- Belmont, N. 1979, « Superstition et religion populaire dans les sociétés occidentales » In : M. Izard et P. Smith (Eds) *La Fonction symbolique (Essais d'anthropologie)*. Paris: Gallimard, pp. 53-70.
- Benoit, F. 1930, « Survivances des civilisations méditerranéennes chez les Berbères » *Revue anthropologique*, t.XL, n° 7-9: 278-293.
- Bertholon, L. 1898, « Les premiers colons de souche européenne dans l'Afrique du nord. Essai historique sur l'origine de certaines populations berbères d'après les documents Egyptiens et certains auteurs de l'antiquité » *Revue tunisienne*, V: 47-70, 143-167, 354-371 et 423-443.
- Bertholon, L., Chantre E., 1913, *Recherches anthropologiques dans la Berbérie orientale, Tripolitaine, Tunisie, Algérie*. Lyon: Rey.
- Bloom, A. 1987, *L'âme désarmée. Essai sur le déclin de la culture*. Paris: Julliard.
- Boëtsch, G., Ferrié J.-N., 1989, « Le Paradigme berbère. Approche de la logique classificatoire des anthropologues français du XIXe siècle » *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, vol. I (nlle série), n°3-4: 257-276.
- Döllinger, W. 1890, *Beitrag zur sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*. Munich : Beck.
- Eliade, M. 1963, *Aspects du Mythe*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Ferrié, J.-N. 1993a, « Le comparatisme diachronique et l'ethnographie touareg » *In*: Claudot-Hawad (Ed.) (Le politique dans l'histoire touarègue) *Les Cahiers de l'IREMAM*, 4: 13-18.
- Ferrié, J.-N. 1993b, « La naissance de l'aire culturelle méditerranéenne dans l'anthropologie physique de l'Afrique du Nord » *In*: G. Boëtsch & J.-N. Ferrié, (Eds) (Le Savant et le Berbère) *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, n° 129: 139-151.
- Ferrié, J.-N., 1994 « “ Sciences coloniales ”, centralité scientifique et périphérie savante. Le Maghreb et l'Egypte comme applications locales d'un discours global » *Annales islamologiques (IFAO)*, XXVIII : 231-257.
- Ferrié, J.-N. Boëtsch G., 1992, « Du Berbère aux yeux clairs à la race eurafricaine: la Méditerranée des anthropologues physiques ». *In*: K. Basfao & J.-R. Henry, (Eds) *Le Maghreb, l'Europe et la France*. Paris: Presses du CNRS, pp.191-207.
- Ginzburg, C. 1992, *Le Sabbat des sorcières*. Paris: Gallimard (trad. de *Il Sabbato*. Turin: Einaudi, 1989).
- Gsell, S. 1913 - 1929, *Histoire ancienne de l'Afrique du Nord*, (8 vol.) Paris: Hachette.
- Kertzer, D. 1988, *Ritual, Politics and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Laoust, E. 1920, *Mots et choses berbères*. Paris: Larose.
- Ossman, S. « Bob Marley entre nous deux : essai sur les enchaînements de la mimesis ». A paraître dans la revue *Hermès*.
- Rogers, S. 1991, *Shaping Modern Times in Rural France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Westermarck, E. 1935, *Survivances païennes dans la civilisation mahométane*. Paris : Payot (trad. de *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation*. London: Macmillan,1933).
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.