BOOK REVIEW


This review of the Tunisian Institute of Arabic Literature has been published since 1964 under the editorship of two French scholars, André Demeersman and Michel Lelong. The former prefaces the present issue with a thought-provoking and almost poetic obituary in memory of Father Quéméneur, a French sage who settled in Tunisia. The obituary is followed by a long list of Quéméneur’s articles mostly devoted to the study of the dialect, proverbs, folklore, and literature of Tunisia.

The first article is a sociological survey by Taoufik Rabah on literacy campaigns: What motivates Tunisian adults to become literate? The author, who appears to be well-trained, has done extensive research substantiated by a plethora of statistical data and sample surveys. He starts with the indubitably correct surmise that most of the literacy campaigns in developing countries do not achieve the desired objectives because they are not preceded by the requisite sociological ground-work. Literacy, he holds, can be spread more effectively once the dominant motives that could induce the majority of illiterate citizens to learn are properly recognised and, subsequently, made appeal to. Motivation number one is the longing for information and culture (with information having precedence over culture!). Being still quite restricted in their movements, women are more eager to collect information about the world to which men have comparatively easy access even without information media. Taoufik Rabah, therefore, makes the striking revelation that the longing for information and culture is deeper in women as compared to men.

Second in importance is the motivation to assist the children in their home-work, not only for ensuring a better future for their offspring but more so for overcoming the alienation between the two generations which naturally becomes more pronounced where the intellectual gap between the two widens. The third is the motivation to get a better job, and the fourth on the list is “prestige in the neighbourhood.”—“Prestige within the family”, which is treated separately, is in fact a point of special interest as many literate interviewees have averred that literacy helps cementing family ties which are otherwise threatened by the impact of modernity. This is particularly the case among factory workers and also true of the dissolving tribal society of the south where the individual is gradually losing his well-defined social assignment of yore. With the disruption of the traditional clan structure and the emergence of the smaller family unit man is in search of a means to regain security and stability; to many the answer is education. In the end, there is a special section listing less common motives. Taoufik Rabah’s study could be of great value to the ministries of education in most of the developing countries.

The article by Paul Sebag about the maritime achievements of Hassan Ibn Nu’mân proceeds from a report by Al-Raqiq who wrote that the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwân ordered Hassan Ibn Nu’mân to “make the sea come right to Tunis”. Sebag examines carefully the different interpretations given to this order and the way it was carried ou·
He concludes that the Arabs, who established themselves in Tunis at the end of the seventh century, did not really lead the sea toward Tunis in the literal sense of the word. The city of Tunis, he contends, was situated at the shores of a lake which existed much earlier than the arrival of the Arabs. Neither did they create a formerly non-existent connection between the lake and the sea, because at Maxula there existed since ancient times a natural passage through the coastal cordon which separates the sea from the lake; nor did they dig an artificial canal through the lake because such a project was not technically feasible at that time as they lacked the necessary know-how. Besides, there is no trace of it, either in the Middle Ages or in the modern times. What they did was the construction of a port-canal at the broadest point of the coastal cordon. This is to be identified with the port-canal of La Goulette at the entrance of which a castle must have been built, at some unknown date, to defend the access. In Tunis they built an arsenal and a port, connected with the port-canal by a natural passage through the lake. There is little doubt that it was much deeper than it is at present. Thanks to these works undertaken by Ḥassān Ibn Nʿūmān, Tunis became a sea-base from where the Arabs started their maritime expedition against the Byzantine occupied coasts which they longed to incorporate in their empire.

Safia Kedous has contributed a highly learned literary comparison between the Arab-Iranian writer Al-Hamadānī (died 1008 in Herat) and the French author and encyclopedist Denis Diderot (died in Paris 1784). The author herself frankly admits that drawing such parallels between oriental and occidental personalities is an almost outmoded pursuit. In this context she refers to comparisons of Maʿarri and Milton, Ibn Khaldūn and Spencer, Ḥayy Ibn Yaqqūn and Robinson Crusoe, Ἀνταρ and Pyrrhus. She may be delighted to learn that in Pakistan such comparative studies are still very much in vogue (“Ghālib and Baudelaire” is just one example). Her comparison of the writers of misery who sell themselves to any patron is, moreover, so convincing and so moving that one feels truly grateful to her for this contribution to the study of literature as the sublime expression of the soul, not just of an Eastern or a Western writer, but of humanity as a whole. Poverty has haunted both literateurs “to the point”, she writes, “that faqr is the key-word” to both, the Sessions of Nishāpūr by Hamadānī and to The Nephew of Rameau by Diderot. In the upheavals that shook the societies of their respective times—which resemble each other closely—they saw no way out except to seek the favour of some prince or a bourgeois upstart. At the same time they sought liberation from this degenerate state of affairs in some of their writings. Thus both the above-mentioned works join hands in a mordant criticism of the parasite writers, the partakers of rich meals and recipients of subsidies which they obtain at the price of base sycophancy.

Another bond that unites the French and the Persian author, writes Safia Kedous, is their religious despair in the face of the galling hypocrisy of the upper classes and the tribulations of the downtrodden masses. Reacting against sterile conventions and fallacious interpretations of the word of God that characterised their epochs, both writers end up in a sort of scepticism that borders upon agnosticism, if not atheism. — Needless to say that this exposition, like all the other contributions to IBLA by Muslim authors, is written in excellent French typical of modern bilingual North Africa.

Social Categories in Tunisia during the 19th Century is an article by the director, A. Demeerseman. It is an instalment in a series on the work of a certain Bin Diyaf,
this part being devoted to Science (‘ilm) and Social Position (manzilat). This analytical study bears a certain relationship to the research of Taoufiq Rabah on the motivation for literacy. In this way the present issue of IBLA is devoted to a particular aspect of intellectual life, viz, the relationship of education or knowledge as such and the rank or function of the educated man in society. The essay by Safia Kedous has also to be viewed in this perspective. As an exception, the maritime works of Hassan Ibn Nu'man do not, of course, fall into this category of contributions. Similarly outside the purview of the main topic of this IBLA number is the stimulating research paper on Philosophy and Revelation with Avicenna by the renowned Islamist Robert Caspar, formerly of Cairo. Caspar presents a translation from a forgotten treatise by Ibn Sīnā entitled Risāla Aḍḥāwiyiya fi-Amr al-Maḍād which was edited in 1969. Caspar introduces his translation with a brief outline of Christian Philosophy as against Muslim Philosophy as well as an exposition of the conflict between philosophy and revelation with the Muslim philosophers before Ibn Sīnā. He then analyses with his characteristic clarity and precision the rediscovered text and ends with remarks on the religious philosophy of Ibn Sīnā.

Whereas Louis Gardet has defined the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā and others as "a philosophy of Hellenistic inspiration, Arab or Persian expression, and Muslim influences", Caspar feels tempted to go farther than that and to discern here a philosophy that is genuinely Muslim. "Ibn Sīnā", he infers, "was certainly a religious philosopher and even a 'believer' in the theistic sense. But it seems as if he 'believed' more in his philosophy and in the 'God of the philosophers' than in the God of revelation, in 'the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'. . . . It is the nature of faith itself which is in question."

1969 witnessed the performance of several theatre plays that made their mark on the intellectual life of Tunisia. For this reason IBLA records a discussion on the Tunisian theatre. The talk focuses chiefly on the play: Al-Ṭufān by Mustapha Fersi and Tijani Zalila, as well as on 'Ahd al-Burāq by Habib Boulares. The major contributor to the discussion is Taoufik Baccar, a professor of Arabic and member of the National Commission for Theatre Orientation. Baccar spreads the glad tidings of a new spirit that sweeps the Tunisian stage which was, for a long time, the refuge of melodramatic heroic feats. Now, it has finally broken with that outworn tradition and has adopted new techniques and fresh themes. Instead of proffering moral exhortations and patriotic harangues, it has now turned toward major problems of society and endeavours to shed new light on them. It is, however, disheartening to note that the despair of a torn mind and soul which is so common among Muslim peoples, still persists even among the otherwise advanced Tunisians.

Thus, we see there is still a long way to go toward the emancipation that was envisaged by Frantz Fanon. In his epoch-making work The Wretched of the Earth (1963) this coloured apostle of North African revolutionism speaks about the new movement, "the new rhythm of life", in the following words:

"As for dramatisation, it is no longer placed on the plane of the troubled intellectual and his tormented conscience. By losing its characteristics of despair
and revolt, the drama becomes part of the common lot of the people and forms part of an action in preparation or already in progress." (p. 194)

The discussion in IBLA gives proof of the fact that Tunisia's national bourgeoisie which was handed over the reins of power by the departing colonist has not yet fully realised the aspirations of the toiling masses.

Baccar devotes a considerable portion of his analysis to the language problem — which reminds us of similar discussions in Pakistan. The charge against many playwrights abandoning themselves all too readily to the temptations of sumptuous and jingling expression can of course be levelled against a number of their colleagues all over the world, though it is probably nowhere as apt as in the realm of classical Arabic. The controversy as to whether to give preference to common parlance of Tunisia over the Arabic fushat has a parallel in the dispute over Punjabi and Urdu. The conclusion is that in an age of mass culture the natural trend is to favour the Tunisian dialect. Taoufik Baccar's advocacy of this development stems from a strong conviction, though his argument is based on the accomplished fact that the use of the dialect makes theatre plays and television programs more successful and popular. Tunisia, therefore, witnesses the same phenomenon as Pakistan with the local popularity of Punjabi (and of late even Pashtu) films as against Urdu productions.

Chronicles of the Tunisian theatre and cinema are followed by a report on the movements of magazines in that country during 1969, i.e., a report about magazines that either continued or started publication during that year along with those that ceased to appear. The result is that beside the purely technical publications of bank statistics etc., there appear four daily papers in Tunisia (two in Arabic and two in French), two weekly newspapers in Arabic, as well as twelve periodicals in Arabic and twenty in French.

Among the many well-written and highly scholarly book-reviews, one has to mention, first of all, the essay by Maurice Borrmanns on a work by Ali Merad: *Muslim Reformism in Algeria between 1925 and 1940*. No less important is Robert Caspar's detailed discussion of a book by Louis Gardet: *Islam — Religion and Community*. Louis Gardet, a prolific author in French, is one of the leading authorities on Islam in this later half of the century.

Taieb Baccouche reviews a study by Pierre Faure that is highly interesting for linguists: *An Introduction to the Arabic spoken in the East of Tchad*. We, furthermore, learn about a pioneering analysis of *Modern Algerian Literature* by a Czech scholar Svetozar Pantucek. Among the two books by Hady Roger Idris (reviewed by A. Demeeersman) that on *The Hilali Invasion and its Consequences* deserves special attention. IBLA concludes with several pages of Tunisian references, i.e., a list of publications (from September 1969 to March 1978) on Archeology, Bibliography, Culture, Law, Economy, Folklore, Geography, History, Literature, Linguistics, Education, Politics, Sociology, and Science. The number of books written by Tunisians on Tunisia and their high standard in general is truly amazing. Taking into account the small size of Tunisia and its little population of about five million, one cannot but bow to this intellectually agile and highly productive nation.
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A special merit of IBLA is that since its first issue it has not only maintained its high standard but constantly improved upon it. Although not illustrated, (with the exception of maps), it could somehow be compared to the Pakistan Quarterly plus a selection of the best from Iqbal Review, Islamic Studies, Contemporary Affairs, and Pakistan Horizon. The title: IBLA stands for Institute des Belles Lettres Arabes. Overcome with a sort of awe, the reviewer feels tempted to read IBLA like a vulgarization, common in many Arab lands, of the sacrosanct word qibla, to be understood as a finger-post for the intellegentsia all over the Muslim world.

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