Identity Politics in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia and Implications on English Language Teaching: A Rebuttal of Closure

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Abstract

This paper is about the political implications of the spread of English in post-revolutionary Tunisia. It raises fundamental questions about the nature of the revolution of 14th of January in Tunisia, identity politics and language. Subsequently, this paper debunks the conventional views of English language teaching and applied linguistics as independent from identity politics. English is thus taught in a new political context marked by a post-modern and deconstructive conception of identity. From this vantage point, this article attempts to discuss the ‘becoming’ of both the Tunisian identity and the English language in post-revolutionary Tunisia. It delineates the characteristics of the Tunisian identity by invoking Maryse Condé’s Segu. In effect, I propose to examine three interrelated issues of alarming importance: the discontinuities that not only separated the past and the present, but also the ongoing association between English as an international language and Tunisian identity; the variety of the emerging cultural identities and their potential as alternatives; and finally, the special knowledge that Tunisians believed they gained as a result of understanding their identity in dialogic and horizontal terms.

Keywords: English Language, Tunisian Identity, Becoming, Religion, Secularism, and Ethics of Citizenship.
In Tunisia, one cannot take his/her identity for granted. Tunisians’ long history of interrupted political independence has not provided them with a keen awareness of their identity and community. The deep imprint of French colonialism has militated against the development of a local identity. Accordingly, the search for self-definition has grown of particular concern for Tunisians who have not ceased to define themselves in new ways, ways that are different from those of the pre-revolution period. The concept of identity plays a prominent role in the current political scene in Tunisia. Psychologist Erik Erikson was the first to explore the concept of identity. The term identity is presently used to denote personal and social identities. Where “social identity” refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes, personal identity is some distinguishing characteristic that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential, but unchangeable (Fearon 2). It is only recently that critical representations of the personal identities of Tunisians have tended to be “religious.” After the revolution, Tunisians grew aware of their identities’ inner divisions and of the ‘Other’ living within them.

Within the scope of this paper, identity politics functions as the ‘regime’ of truth in the Tunisian society after the revolution of the 14th of January exhorting readers to critically re-evaluate the implications of English teaching on identity politics in Tunisia. This paper follows critic Pennycook in discussing the spread of English in terms of Galtung’s (1971) concept of center and periphery. Lately, English language has penetrated the political scene of developing nations, like, Tunisia. The coverage of Tunisian revolution and the rising number of doctoral dissertations on the repercussions of the revolution can attest to the inextricable relation between the English language and the politics of Tunisian identity. This recalls back Appadurai’s (1990) appraisal that “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping disjunctive order, which can no longer be understood in terms of existing center periphery models” (32). The spread of English is in accordance with the dethroning of dictators in the Arab world. English is thus ideologically encumbered.

Instead of viewing schools as “neutral sites where a curricular body of information is passed on to students” (Pennycook 297), this paper urges readers to think of educational institutions as cultural and political arenas in which different
values are in struggle. Teachers of English in Tunisia need to see themselves as “transformative intellectuals [rather than mere] classroom technicians employed to pass on a body of knowledge” (Pennycook 299). This new position of the Tunisian teacher drives me to say that Tunisian identity holds an in-between position between the secular/profane and the religious/sacred. In the choice between “Mecca or mechanization,” the common impression is that religion rather than progress seems to be winning the argument for the majority of Tunisians, using Lerner’s formulation (508).

To better understand the main characteristics of the Tunisian identity, an identity which rebutes and defies closure in the aftermath of the revolution, I will invoke Maryse Condé’s famous novel Segu which is an epic historical novel spanning the continents of Africa, South America and Europe; and three generations of an aristocratic Bambara family, the Traores (Browne 183). Segu can be perceived as the echo of the archetypal ambiguity perfected in post-revolution Tunisia.

**Teaching Against the Grain: Segu and the Pedagogy of Possibility in Tunisia**

Set in Segu, the ancestral home of the Traores, a town between Bamiko and Timbuktu in present-day Mali, yet branching out to Brazil, England and Jamaica, Condé’s best-selling Segu is a spectacular multigenerational saga depicting the grandeur and decline of a Malian family in the midst of turbulent conflicts between Muslims, animists and Westerners (Pfaff xi). Indeed, the kingdom of Segu, steeped in customary animist beliefs, and in the traditions of storytelling, oral history and griots’ singing chronicles is undergoing radical change. This is initially demonstrated through the intersecting fates of four different brothers. The four sons are torn between Islam and tradition in which there is a sense of kinship between man and nature; between joining traders and merchants, and remaining within their aristocratic agricultural heritage; and between fighting or succumbing to slave traders. Therefore, the major conflict in the novel is not between the four brothers, but between the opposing world views and value systems of fetishism, Islam and Christianity (Browne 183).

Another significant character who expresses the various influences of identity choices on the city of Segu is Olubunmi. His characterization evokes this idea:
Olubunmi had done several years of koranic study, and also been initiated into the secret societies. So he wore gris-gris around his waist intermingled with squares of parchment bearing verses from the Koran, of which he could also recite a few suras. He dressed like a Muslim but wore his hair long and braided. In short, he epitomized the transitional period through which Segu was passing. But, he couldn’t forget the foreign blood in his veins. Who else in Segu could boast of having an Agouda mother from Benin? Or a father who had travelled as far as the coast, when most Bambara had never even crossed the Joliba? (Segu 448)

As the story unfolds, the readers learn that this character has succeeded in navigating racial, religious and political differences. He has not lost the ability to give the situation any coherent meaning. Values are becoming determinate and his personality grows vitalized.

More importantly, religious truth is perceived “as a ‘matrix of individuation’ which forms, shapes and governs individuality” (Smart 162). This allows for a picture of society that exposes the techniques and tactics by which relations of power and truth have constituted forms of domination through which the individual is simultaneously free and governed, and on the basis of which an elaborate social structure is built (Ibironke 117). The political rationality of this historical novel projects the apparatus of heterogeneous relations through which a complex process of power is exercised. Undermining the organic ritual unity of the Traore family is the basis of the internal contradictions in Segu. From the onset, Tiekoro, the first-born son of Dousika, converts to Islam. He observes that:

There were degrees in faith. The first relates to the masses, who are guided by the prescriptions of the law. The second belongs to men who have overcome their faults and set out on the path that leads to truth. The third is that of an elite, and those who attain it worship God in truth and pure, colorless light. The divine Truth blooms in the fields of Love and Charity.

That was the degree of faith which Tiekoro aspired to. (Segu 94)

The substructure of Tiekoro’s personality is imbued with fetishism, but his consciousness is enamoured by Islam (Ibironke 115). As one can easily infer, in Condé’s Segu, characters are the archetypes of the intersection between Islam and secularism.
Condé’s novel is both revealing and abstruse. This leads us to assert, following Pennycook, that “perhaps language- and particularly English as an international language- should also be replaced by a vision of powerful discursive formations globally and strategically employed” (64). As a reference novel, Segu reflects on how both secular and religious Tunisians, can be two contrasting breaths of the same spirit. In other words, they are doubles. One has no identity without the other. Their fates are thus complementary. Herein lies the pulsation of the eternal rhythm of collapsible bonding that exists between Tunisians. Tunisian identity is thus the expression and consummation of the totality of communal beliefs and aspirations.

Rethinking Tunisian Identity: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers

Before the revolution, an ordinary Tunisian was not free to show openly the religious side of his/her identity. In an interview with Béatrice Hibou, Sadri Khiari explains that the Tunisian revolution was an abrupt acceleration of political temporality, a historical rupture that expresses itself by the surging crowds (218), who used to be silent. Before the revolution, Tunisia was represented as a peaceful country with a history condemned to eternal inertia (“Interview with Khiari” 219-220). The only potential of political destabilization was detected where it did not exist: in Islamic fundamentalism (“Interview with Khiari” 219). Resistance was almost absent before the revolution. Head-scarfed women were oppressed. They were chased by the Tunisian police and prohibited to pursue education at universities.

Once oppressed, the islamists were liberated from silence after the revolution. It appears that they have found a way to liberation. The contemporary political arena of Tunisia is conspicuous for confrontation between the islamists and the secularists. Revivalism of Tunisians’ traditions and customs was a popular protest against the cultural, political and economic domination of the West, a rediscovery of the authentic self, indeed. However, it turns out that the crucible of Tunisian revolution reinforced a crisis in Tunisian identity. Tunisia is a modern country with an overwhelming Muslim majority. The liberal defence of Islamic revivalism took a wrong direction. While Islamic revivalism is meant to dispel a distorted image of Islam, it has transformed spiritual Islam into political Islam. Islam is thus politicized. Subsequently, Tunisians who are not practical believers
can be marginalized.

To belittle and downplay this category of people is a non-authentic cultural implant and a rejection of the dynamics of intercultural interactions. In this vein, secular Tunisian politicians have asserted that Tunisia is witnessing a return to seventh-century Arabia, out of tune with the modern world. The axis around which Islamism appeared to revolve has frequently been presented as “an anti-modern character,” involved in “turning back the clock of history” (Sayyid 89). Secular critics of Islamist claims often dismiss them as utopian: “the hope, or conviction, that rulers can be kept out of mischief by adhering to a certain set of doctrines, or leading an ascetic way of life, is as old as the notion of Utopia in human history (…) one which has so far rarely worked in practice” (Enayat 104). Imrana Jan, a prominent media representative of Hizb Ettahrir Britain- “The Party of Liberation” attended the International Conference held in Tunisia and said that: “The nightmare is not with Islam, it is with secularism” (as cited in www.tunisia-live.net).

The upsurge in movements of religious reform meant to revitalize Islam and with it Tunisian identity has resulted in a range of responses, connected by a common desire to strengthen Islam in relation to the rising challenges. Besides, misperceptions about the degree to which Islam can or cannot cope with changes in post-modern Tunisia have been reinforced. One must, therefore, acknowledge the variations and intense debates which have existed and continue to exist within Islam (Eickelman and Piscatori 162). From this vantage point, being Muslim in post-revolution Tunisia is conjectural. This is due partly to the fact that religion has become integral to the issue of identity among Tunisians. There is still a tendency to assume that Tunisians represent one reality and all speak with one voice, even though the latest events have never really supported this assumption.

On the contrary, Tunisians have agreed to disagree. Both religious and political differences have repeatedly hindered attempts by Tunisians to create greater union among themselves lately. Despite the vitality of contemporary debates on the subject, the prospects of an Islamic state, for instance, are arguably as distant as they have ever been. Moreover, politicians play an important part in heightening mass awareness and disseminating ideas, hence, intensifying debate. Tunisians are thus divided religiously speaking into a variety of groups. The two main camps are moderate Sunni and extremist Sunni. While these camps have
more in common with each other than with other sects within Islam, there are
important differences between them in terms of particular interpretations of
‘Sunna.’

The growing number of the so-called ‘salafis’ in Tunisia is considered as a
‘threat,’ based on a clash of understanding. Besides, politicized Islam, a feature of
contemporary Muslim politics in Tunisia, epitomizes this threat in relation with the
issue of identity. The salafis’ struggle to impose Sharia does reflect deeply rooted
understandings and impressions of the inextricable relationship between religion
and politics which exists within Islam. However, it disguises the breadth of
diversity and opinion among Tunisians (Geertz). Alongside the religious beliefs
and rituals which bind Tunisians into a common rhythm of life, considerable
differences can be found between urban and rural Tunisians, between the rich and
the poor, and along sectarian or doctrinal lines.

The resurgence of Islam in Tunisia, however, has not signalled a retreat
from the secular path. The majority of Tunisians do not take the traditional Islamic
society as an ideal model reflecting religious principles guiding the community in
all areas of life, including, politics. This initial split has amounted to a fully
entrenched “war of ideas” between islamists and secularists. I strongly believe that
the debate about Islam and its alleged compatibility with democracy/non-
vioence/pluralism/tolerance is misstated. The real question is not what Islam is,
but what do Tunisians believe in and want? A plausible answer is that Tunisians
fear the inability of Sharia to change and adapt itself to contemporary concerns
and conditions.

As one can easily infer, Tunisians are faced with contending and
contradictory opinions to key questions about their religious, political, social and
cultural identity. While the mixing of religion and politics is regarded as
necessarily abnormal, irrational, dangerous and extremist,1 secularism is seen as
the best means to promote tolerance, pluralism and fairness in Tunisia. It is worth
noting that both islamism and secularism put into play different structures of
ambition and fear. Thus, rethinking islamism and secularism seems to be
compulsory.

A critical problem that all religious reformers face is the relationship

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1 John L. Esposito. “Islam and Secularism in the Twenty-First Century” in Islam and Secularism in the Middle
between their reformist thought and the authority of tradition, hence, the need to demonstrate some kind of continuity between tradition and change. Besides, Tunisians cherish political freedom and liberties. For Tunisians, democracy is among the most frequent responses given as a key to a fair and just society. However, the majority do not prefer wholesale adoption of Western models of democracy and secular society. Tunisians opt for greater political participation and freedom and rule of law, but not for a totally secular state. Tunisians’ perceptions of Sharia and the degree to which it is possible to implement its rulings in society vary enormously. The majority prefer a system of government in which religious principles and democratic values co-exist. In other words, Tunisians do not view religious authority and political authority as mutually exclusive. Instead, they envisage a role for religious principles in the formulation of state legislation. This ambivalent position reflects an alarming need for a rethinking of the identity of Tunisians.

Ethics of Citizenship and the Appeal of Islamism?

Oversimplifying the dichotomy between Islamic identity and modern secular identity has underestimated the complex process of interactions among Tunisians. The hold of religion over society and its people diminishes under conditions prevailing in industrial-scientific society. One striking counter-example to this assumption is the hold of Islam over Muslims, which has not diminished, but has rather increased. Islam, which many in the West expected to wither away as Muslim Tunisians become more ‘modern,’ has done just the opposite. Islam has not just survived, but it has asserted its ability to rethink the meaning of modernity in accordance with the aura of Islam. Special insights come from Tariq Ramadan, who is a European Muslim intellectual activist. Rejecting a polarized view of the world that posits Muslims against Westerners or a clash between Islam and secularism, Ramadan advocates a synthesis, an identity based on common values as a basis for citizenship.

An “ethics of citizenship” requires that decisions will be made in the name of shared principles, such as, the rule of law, equal citizenship irrespective of religion, universal suffrage and the accountability of leaders not solely based on religious identity. Thus, Tunisians must advocate a secular democracy incorporating a strong policy of religious pluralism. Embracing secularism,

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Ramadan believes, is not a betrayal of Muslim principles for it enables all citizens to live together. Secularism is the necessary condition for religious freedom. Tunisians must show to their fellow citizens and Muslims around the world that they respect the law, even if they disagree with it.

The successful encounter of Islam and secularism has two interconnected pre-requisites: Tunisians must come to terms with Islam, and the government must facilitate their integration by accommodating and institutionalizing their political, economic, social and cultural needs. It is worth noting that democracy and the rule of law are universal values. Democracy has even Quranic overtones implied in Quranic and traditional Islamic notions of deliberation and consultation (the so-called Shura). Religious pluralism and tolerance are not simply a theological issue, but a divine mandate, rooted in Quranic passages. This brings to the fore the debate about the mixing of politics and religion. Unsurprisingly, the status of Sharia and its relationship to political authority has produced sharp disagreements and contentious debate between scholars and politicians.

In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, the mixing of politics and religion may be seen as counter-productive. Modern Islamists contend that imposing Sharia as the rule of law is necessary in order to make Tunisian society more Islamic. To conflate politics and religion can lead to dangerous confusion. No state has the right to enforce religious law, even if it is the religion of the majority of citizens: “By its nature and purpose, Sharia can only be freely observed by believers; its principles lose their religious authority and value when enforced by the state.”

Instead of imposing Islamic law, modern Islamists would rather foster ethics in society. The primary means to this cultural and spiritual path are education, dialogue and an open exchange of ideas to improve relations between Tunisians. Tunisians of different religious backgrounds should be aware of three basic Quranic principles: humanity as one community; Tunisians should compete among themselves to do good; and the necessity for compassion and forgiveness. These principles concern not only personal convictions or morality, but also the need to establish an ethical public order consistent with Islam’s role as a “faith in the public realm.”


The degree of compromise and adjustment between Islam and Western secular visions of progress has come to be overshadowed by more radical responses by fundamentalist Muslims, or more accurately, Islamists. The so-called Islamists have demanded the establishment of an Islamic order or nizam in which religion and politics are properly integrated. The deficiencies of the materialistic Western-style nation-state, they feel, can best be remedied by a ‘theo-democracy,’ administered by a new style government. A modernized state would take responsibility for the Islamic renewal. To peoples who did not distinguish clearly between religious and secular authority, the intruding system of belief and literacy was far more than religion (Kemedgio & Mitsch 130). It represented a new way of coming to terms with the world. Prayer, writing, reading, religious practices and pilgrimages would strengthen the power of the adherent (Hale 7-8).

In brief, secular reformers wish to dismiss the vital relationship between religion and the identity of Tunisians arguing that Tunisia as a Muslim country was and is still secular. Many others, while admiring and desiring some of the principles and institutions associated with Western secular democracies, can only cherish a Muslim identity. Instead, they opt for an identity that reflects the importance and force of Islamic principles and values as they proceed to engage in reformist thinking. Successful reformers and social movements, from traditional to more liberal orientations, are engaged in rethinking Tunisian identity and its relationship to Islam, secularism and democracy. They will continue to give importance to their framing narrative to legitimize and mobilize popular support.

However, all Tunisians have to grapple in dynamic and tolerant fashion with the challenges of the aftermath of the revolution designed to strengthen and reinforce Tunisian identity and culture. Islam is not to be viewed as a monolithic force. Tunisians should acknowledge sectarian and political differences. These must not fracture Tunisians’ unity and identity. While the emphasis today is on the phenomenon of Islamism, it is important to understand Islamism in the context of its time and to appreciate the presence of other strands of religious and political thinking among Tunisians. Despite all clashes, Tunisia can still exhibit religious, political and cultural pluralism today.
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