

How the West Was Won: The Arab Conqueror and the Serene Amazigh in Driss Chraïbi's *La Mère du printemps*

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The Moroccan author Driss Chraïbi (1926–2007), more than any other writer in the Maghreb, has portrayed Islam as a colonizing force and focused on the impact of the Arab conquest of North Africa on the original Amazigh (Berber) societies in the region. Although other North African authors, most notably the Algerian writer Kateb Yacine, have given importance to Amazigh characters and themes in their works, Chraïbi is distinctive because he explicitly addresses the arrival of Islam in North Africa through a fictionalized account of the Arab conquest of the region in the Seventh Century CE. *La Mère du printemps* is particularly noteworthy because it complements historical scholarship on this conquest and offers a literary perspective on Islamic identity in the Maghreb.¹

Despite Chraïbi's warning, printed at the beginning of the book, in which he insists that it is indeed a novel and not a work of history, *La Mère du printemps* is nevertheless in dialogue with established historical narratives of the Islamic Empire's earliest westward expansions. In both cases the Arabian Peninsula and the Maghreb are seen as two initially separate places eventually brought together by religion. Islam's birthplace was, technically, the Hejaz in the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, geographically, it is not a North African religion in origin. The original inhabitants of the Maghreb are an ethnic group different from the Arabs who brought Islam to North Africa. This geographical perspective, however, is limited. It is open to question whether or not the Arabian Peninsula at the time (as well as in the present day) was part of the same cultural space as Africa.

As Islam spread outside the Hejaz, it became, among other things, what could be considered a fully-fledged African religion, in view of the extent to which it was shaped by non-Arab practices on that continent. The historian David Robinson distinguishes between "Islamization" and "Africanization" to suggest that at least two

processes were involved in the arrival of Islam in Africa:² while Islamization refers simply to the spread of the religion into the continent, Africanization indicates the particular way in which Islam was appropriated and influenced by African practices from both sides of the Sahara. In this view, the Africanization of Islam is an ongoing process that has involved a multitude of locations in both North and sub-Saharan Africa.

Robinson insists that there is nothing pejorative about his use of the term “Africanized Islam,” because he is aware that the association of the religion with sub-Saharan Africa has in fact sometimes been perceived negatively, not only by colonizing Europeans but also by other Muslims.³ The appropriation of this negative vision by Europeans and Arabs alike has endured, resulting in a latitude-based racial hierarchy in Islam that places North Africa closer to the center of the religious empire while pre-Arab components of the region are marginalized along with Islamic sub-Saharan Africa. According to Robinson, this view is traceable to the second century CE and to Ptolemy’s climatic conception that Mediterranean societies, such as those of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, constitute the center of civilization, while those of other regions are peripheral.⁴ Robinson focuses on European attempts to rationalize the arrival of Islam in civilized climes.⁵ These attempts range from waves of demonizing discourses regarding Islam following the conquest of the southern Iberian Peninsula to more recent French colonial efforts to distinguish between Muslims on both sides of the Sahara in order to undermine the formation of alliances between colonized peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Whereas historical narratives have tended to view the spread of Islam to the Maghreb chiefly as the Islamization/Arabization of Northern Africa and its Amazigh indigenous populations, Chraïbi, like Robinson, views the process as one in which the indigenous populations affected the religion, “Africanized” it, and shaped their ties to the Arab world. Furthermore, in Chraïbi’s literary take on the subject, Islamic identity in the Maghreb as we think of it today – and indeed the very reason for the endurance of the religion in the region – is more Amazigh and less Arab than is generally perceived. As *La Mère du printemps* is intimately related to historical narratives, it is essential to start with an overview of these narratives to appreciate Chraïbi’s text more fully.

From an historical perspective, the initial interest in the Maghreb after the Prophet’s death came under the caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who ruled for a period of ten years starting in 634 CE. The Islamic conquest of what was then still called Ifriqiya⁶ was essentially a westward movement that started with the conquest of Egypt following the enthusiastic efforts of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās in 640. Much of what

is known today of the conquest of Egypt is owed to the ninth-century CE Egyptian scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (803–871 CE), who received most of his information from his father ‘Abd Allāh (771–c. 829 CE), an important figure of early Maliki law.⁷ Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam’s account, entitled *Futūḥ Miṣr*, was edited on the basis of all the extant manuscripts and published by Charles Torrey in 1922.⁸

Egypt, once a part of the Byzantine Empire, came under Islamic control after a number of military campaigns by Arabs, followed by settlements in and about al-Fuṣṭāṭ and Alexandria. Two important moments stand out in these campaigns. The first consists of the capture in 641 CE of the fortress of Bab al-Yun (Babylon) at the southern tip of the Nile delta, where the city of Cairo is presently located. This area also comprised the city of Miṣr, which became the Arabic name for Egypt, and Heliopolis, the site of an important battle and currently a suburb of Cairo. The second moment was the surrender of Alexandria by treaty, which sealed ‘Amr’s conquest of Egypt. Following the taking of Alexandria in 642 CE, Arabs conducted raids towards the West to maintain a hold on the Egyptian conquests. The priority was not to gain territory or booty as much as it was to protect achievements in Egypt against the potential threat of the Byzantines, who had possessions in the rest of North Africa.⁹ Various campaigns followed, and within seven decades the Arabs had taken control over the entire North African coastline.

Stories about the source of ‘Amr’s interest in Egypt and his persistence against all odds, including the caliph’s doubts about his ability to conquer it, are romanticized to a considerable extent. These stories present the conquest as a divinely foretold, inevitable destiny. When ‘Amr expressed interest in conquering Egypt for the Islamic state, the caliph ‘Umar was hesitant. The caliph allowed ‘Amr to proceed on the condition that, if the caliph were to change his mind, he would send a messenger, and if a message reached ‘Amr before ‘Amr reached Egypt, he should return. ‘Umar did have second thoughts, and he did send a letter to ‘Amr, who guessed its contents and did not open it until he reached Egyptian territory, enabling him to proceed without breaking his promise to the caliph.¹⁰

‘Amr’s interest in Egypt seems to have been chiefly economic, as the following story related by Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam suggests. Before the advent of Islam, ‘Amr had gone to Jerusalem to trade, and he came across a man half dead from thirst on a very hot day. ‘Amr gave him a drink, and the man lay down to sleep. While he was sleeping, a large snake came out of a hole next to him. ‘Amr saw it and killed it by shooting it with an arrow. When the man woke up and saw what had happened, he was grateful and convinced ‘Amr to come with him to his home town of Alexandria,

where he would be able to reward him for saving his life twice, once from thirst and once from a deadly snake. It was then that ‘Amr was able to observe first-hand the wealth of Egypt.¹¹

While the details of these mythologized stories usually call for little more than skepticism from today’s historians, they are indicative of the construction of a discourse whereby the affiliation of North Africa to the Arab world is, in a sense, meant to be. The rhetoric of the conquests in Islamic historiographies can better inform us of the way in which this affiliation took place, starting with the very word by which these conquests are termed in Arabic: *futūḥāt*. As Bernard Lewis reminds us in *The Political Language of Islam*, although the ways in which early Islam spread have been called conquests, the Islamic tradition refers to them as *futūḥāt*, literally “openings.”¹² For Lewis, the *futūḥāt* were seen not as conquests in the sense of forceful territorial acquisitions, but as the “opening” of impious people to the rightful new revelation. The usage of the trilateral root *fṭḥ* (open) connotes the legitimacy of these Islamic advances. In addition to this semantic point and to the stories legitimizing ‘Amr’s conquest of Egypt mentioned above, narratives of the conquest of Africa west of Egypt further illustrate the value of this kind of positive rhetoric in converting North Africa into Arab territory.

Just as the conquest of Egypt is associated with ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās, the conquest of the rest of North Africa is associated with ‘Uqba ibn Nāfi’. ‘Uqba was Amr’s nephew, and he first joined the campaigns in the area that is present-day Libya, playing an important role in obtaining allegiance from the Lawata and Mazata Amazigh peoples around Tripoli in 661.¹³ His most important act was the founding of the city of Kairouan in present-day Tunisia. Later on, ‘Uqba led a number of campaigns in the interior and west of Kairouan, mostly avoiding the Byzantine-held coastline, and went as far as the Atlantic Ocean before making his way back east and dying in battle against an army led by Kusayla, an Amazigh leader whom he had previously defeated. In terms of conquest, ‘Uqba’s expeditions west of Kairouan were of little consequence. They consisted mostly of raids for booty and slaves, particularly female slaves who, according to the fourteenth-century CE scholar Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi,¹⁴ were so astonishingly beautiful that they fetched a handsome price back east.¹⁵ However, no arrangements were made for the collection of tributes or taxes or the establishment of outposts, and only two mosques – in Sus and Wadi Dra in Morocco – are attributed to him.¹⁶ In fact, his raids may have actually impeded the progress of Arab invasions as they drove some of the Amazigh tribes to unite in resistance against the invaders, most notably under the leadership of Kusayla and that of the renowned al-Kāhina (The Priestess). It is only later that Arab presence

in all of North Africa was cemented, largely through the efforts of leaders such as Ḥassan ibn al-Numan al-Ghassani and Musa ibn Nusayr starting in 698 CE. Islam in North Africa was ultimately consolidated through the conversion of Amazigh peoples, who, once converted, supported the conquests, and, in some instances, participated in them militarily as well.

The settlement of Tangiers circa 708 CE can be taken as a marker for the end of this first phase of Muslim settlement in North Africa if we look at the region with today's perspectives on national and continental borders. However, while the strait of Gibraltar may seem a logical frontier, it did not form a lasting obstacle, and the subsequent conquest of the southern Iberian Peninsula was part of the same, continuous movement, even though it was chiefly an Amazigh and not an Arab conquest; Andalusia then became tied to the same cultural and political spheres as the western parts of North Africa for several centuries.

In any case, the endurance of the mythical dimension attached to 'Uqba's expedition is significant, even if his role in converting North Africa to Islam was not substantial historically. As Hugh Kennedy has pointed out, 'Uqba is "credited in historical record and popular imagination with bringing Islamic rule to the Maghreb."¹⁷ While some details surrounding 'Uqba's activities in North Africa have been the subject of thorough historical analyses, other stories about his North African campaigns have been noted but generally regarded as folk tales and dramatic embellishments of secondary importance. Yet these embellishments, which often occur in classical Arabic histories, reveal aspects that can be as informative as the purely historical dimension of these accounts.¹⁸ In a typical example of such stories, 'Uqba miraculously discovers a subterranean spring and brings relief from a lack of water after performing the ritual Islamic prayer and invoking God.¹⁹ These ornamental anecdotes, like those associated with 'Amr's conquest of Egypt, contribute to the discursive claim of North Africa for the Arabs through the portrayal of 'Uqba as victoriously and triumphantly controlling the vast region and overcoming the obstacles it presented.

Several particular events stand out in this regard. One concerns the building of the settlement in Kairouan; another is the moment when 'Uqba reaches the Atlantic Ocean on his westbound campaign. Both of these events are narrated by Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam in the fifth division of *Futūḥ Miṣr* and filtered into popular imagination as well as subsequent histories. The first event, the settlement of Kairouan and the building of its mosque, came out of a desire not to reside among the local population, but to build a new city which Muslims could inhabit.²⁰ When 'Uqba ordered his men to start building, however, they refused, complaining that the site he had

chosen, strategically removed from the sea and safe against possible naval attacks, was infested with lions. ‘Uqba then cried out to the beasts to leave his men alone out of respect for the members of his army who had been companions of the Prophet.²¹ Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi narrates the event:

[Uqba] yelled out: ‘Listen, snakes and lions! We are the companions of the Messenger of God – Peace be upon him. So leave us, for we are settling here and whomever we find after this, we’ll kill!’ The people then witnessed an astonishing thing, as the lions came out of the scrub carrying their cubs in obedience, and the wolves and the snakes likewise carrying their young. The people of Ifriqiya then lived forty years without seeing a single snake, scorpion or lion.²²

The other event which shows ‘Uqba as a victor in North Africa that has subsisted in the popular imagination is his arrival at the Atlantic shore. ‘Uqba rode his horse into the ocean as far as he could, calling upon God to witness that he had gone as far as humanly possible to spread his religion.²³ The fact that his westward conquest could be stopped only by an impassable ocean underscores the divine will behind his endeavor. According to Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi:

[‘Uqba] went on until he reached the ocean, and he entered it until the waters reached his horse’s belly. He then raised his arms to the sky and said: “O God! Had the sea not prevented me, I would have continued on through the country unto the pass of Dhul Qarnayn [in the Quran, a figure who reached the setting place of the sun], defending Your faith and fighting whoever did not believe in You!”²⁴

Such accounts of ‘Uqba’s glorified triumph over the North African environment serve to present the conquest as divinely sanctioned and emphasize the legitimacy of annexing North Africa to the Arab world. The westward spread of Islam is thus conceived as a Manifest Destiny, confirmed by divine signs – springs found miraculously, obedient lions, etc. – and therefore inevitable. From this perspective, whereas historical narratives have tended to view the spread of Islam to the Maghreb chiefly as the Islamization / Arabization of Northern Africa and its Amazigh indigenous populations, Chraïbi, like Robinson, views the process as one where the indigenous populations affected the religion, “Africanized” it, and shaped their ties to the Arab world. Furthermore, in Chraïbi’s literary take on the subject, Islamic identity in the Maghreb as we think of it today – and indeed the very reason for the endurance of the religion in the region – is more Amazigh and less Arab than is generally perceived. If

the imposition of the “Arab World” label on North Africa has been contested in Moroccan literature, it has never been as evident as in Driss Chraïbi’s *La Mère du printemps* (Mother Spring), a novel published in 1982 and translated into English in 1989 by Hugh Harter.²⁵ By then, Chraïbi had already had a tremendous impact on Francophone literature in the Maghreb – indeed he shaped and defined it in many respects following the publication in 1954 of his first novel, *Le Passé simple*,²⁶ a book of such groundbreaking importance of that its publication can be considered a landmark even from a non-literary standpoint.²⁷ With his reputation already established, Chraïbi started showing a more explicit inclination towards topics regarding Islam and Morocco’s Amazigh identity in the 1980s. *La Mère du printemps*, in which the author relates the story of ‘Uqba ibn Nafi’s arrival at the western edge of North Africa from a purely Amazigh point of view, is part of Chraïbi’s so-called “Berber Trilogy” that explores the Arab conquest of Africa and Spain in the seventh century CE. Central to the trilogy is the fictionalized Amazigh clan of Aït Yafelman, from whose perspective history is retold.

The question of which novels make up the trilogy, however, is open to debate. Many critics, including Carine Bourget,²⁸ see the trilogy as consisting of the novels *Une enquête au pays* (1981), *La Mère du printemps*,²⁹ and *Naissance à l’aube* (1985) because they focus on the Aït Yafelman Amazigh clan, share some thematic elements, and have a few common characters whose descriptions are sometimes even copied verbatim from one novel to the other. However, although the Aït Yafelman are introduced in *Une enquête au pays*, that novel does not constitute a re-telling of Islamic history in the way the other two do. Rather, an important difference between this novel and the others is that *Une enquête au pays* is the debut of l’inspecteur Ali, an important character for a different phase of Chraïbi’s work, whom the author revisits many times in later novels. Other evidence as well suggests that *Une enquête au pays* is not part of the trilogy: in a publisher’s foreword to *Naissance à l’aube*, the novel is called the second rather than the third volume of a novelistic fresco (“une fresque romanesque”) that started with *La Mère du printemps*.

If *La Mère du printemps* and *Naissance à l’aube* are indeed part of a trilogy, it would be more appropriate to pair them with a later work, *L’Homme du livre* (1995), which is a fictional biography of the Prophet Mohammed. This novel was announced to be in preparation when *Naissance à l’aube* was first published in 1985, and was then going to be entitled *L’Emir des croyants*, but came out only ten years later.³⁰ This delay, as well as the fact that *L’Homme du livre* was published by Eddif and Balland, whereas *Une Enquête au pays*, *La Mère du printemps*, and *Naissance à l’aube* were all published by Seuil, may have impacted opinions on which novels constitute the trilogy.

La Mère du printemps, however, is particularly important because this novel is the exemplar of a fictional account of the way in which North Africa was annexed to the Arab world following the Islamic conquest of the seventh century CE. While, as mentioned above, Chraïbi reminds readers in a warning note at the beginning of the novel that this is a work of fiction, not a historically accurate account, his inclusion of ‘Uqba as a character makes a bold statement. As Bourget notes, the historical components in Chraïbi’s work constitute a form of demystification of official histories that promote an Arab and Islamic culture at the expense of indigenous populations.³¹

The novel starts with a brief passage in the present day, with the character Raho Aït Yafelman pondering topics such as the past and destiny of Amazigh peoples and Islam in the world. The readers are then transported to the mouth of the Oum-Er-Bia River in Morocco in the seventh century CE, just before the arrival of the Arabs. This is the setting of most of the novel, which centers on the life of the Amazigh protagonist Azwaw Aït Yafelman and his strategies to avoid the extinction of his people as the Arabs gradually approach. After ‘Uqba’s successful conquest of all of North Africa toward the end of the novel, Azwaw converts to Islam; here the narrative mode of the novel changes, with Azwaw becoming the narrator as Imam Filani. This dual identity is ambiguous. While remaining antagonistic to the Arabs, he is also sincere in his new religion. However, he uses the Islamic call to prayer to send coded information to other Amazigh people, and the novel ends with him being discovered doing so and having his tongue cut out in punishment.

Fundamentally a story of cultural conflict, *La Mère du printemps* is a re-telling of the Arab conquest of North Africa from an Amazigh perspective.³² The novel climaxes when Azwaw finally encounters the conquering ‘Uqba at the moment when he rides into the Atlantic waters on his horse. As Violeta Baena Gallé notes,³³ the Arab army in *La Mère du printemps* is always defined in terms of its horses:

The horse was everything: the friend, the brother, the father and the mother, the son and the ancestors. It was the pupil of the eye. The horse was taken care of first, before and after any battle. Whether in bivouac or at a halt, it was by his side that men slept. He was the most beautiful of all Creation: short ears, just like the pasterns and the tail; neck, legs, hips, and stomach long; the forehead, breast, and hips, wide.³⁴

This attention to horses that accompanies descriptions of the Arabs in the novel offers a portrayal of the conquerors as “cowboys” riding into the sunset – literally into the “Far West,” considering that this is precisely how the Maghreb is referred to in Arabic – and taming the “natives.” Not surprisingly, Chraïbi dedicates his novel to

the Native Americans (among other people), thereby solidifying this analogy. In this audacious parallel between the Arab conquest of Africa and the annihilation of many Native American peoples that accompanied European settlement in the Americas, the author assigns an evil role to the Arabs as colonizers, which enables him to question the hegemony of Arab accounts and their impact on the Maghreb. Here, the portrayal of 'Uqba stands in sharp contrast to the conventional historical accounts that memorialize him as a victor, such as *Al-Bayān al-mughrib fī akhbār al-Andalus wa al-Maghrib* by Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi, where the Arab conqueror is, to all intents and purposes, celebrated for his Berber-killing skills.³⁵

In the eleventh chapter of *Le Monde à côté*,³⁶ the second volume of his memoirs, Chraïbi relates briefly his initial interest in writing a fictional account of history in *La Mère du printemps*. While he gives us in his memoirs a clearer understanding of the novel's genesis, his laconic description is more indicative of his peculiar idiosyncratic style and quirky persona. He cryptically mentions the Islam of Ayatollah Khomeini and the socialism of French president François Mitterrand as the backdrop to a "vital" need he felt to look to the past to understand the present better. Chraïbi compares this need to distant music calling him back from his own past, that of the Oum-Er-Bia River that flows into the Atlantic Ocean by the town of Azemmour, which is quite near his own home town of El Jadida (previously known as Mazagan):

I felt the vital need to go back in time, as far back in time as possible, in order to give a corporeal meaning to words and understand the present. It was like a throbbing music that called me from the depths of my past, that of the remembered Oum-Er-Bia, Mother of Spring ... It is there and nowhere else that I set the action of my next novel, in the year 680 CE, at the very moment when, starting from the Tripolitanian desert at the head of the horsemen of Allah, the general Oqba Ibn Nafi would appear, genuine messenger of the new religion.³⁷

The name of the river, Oum-Er-Bia, meaning "mother of spring" in Arabic, gives the novel its title. Although Chraïbi had already decided that the novel would be set by that river, and that it would be about 'Uqba's arrival from the east, he explains in *Le Monde à côté* that he was faced with writer's block. As he was struggling with this project, he went to bed one night after his wife had played a recording of Omar Naqishbendi playing the lute, only to wake up in the middle of the night with a case of insomnia. It was only after trying to go back to sleep by drinking several glasses of single-malt whisky that he realized, in a drunken epiphany, that music should be

central to this novel. In fact, in the novel a character named Naqishbendi plays a lute as 'Uqba and his troops reach the Atlantic.

The importance of music in this novel, and in the work of Chraïbi in general, has been discussed by Stéphanie Delayre in *Driss Chraïbi, une écriture de traverse*.³⁸ According to Delayre,³⁹ Chraïbi explains that although in *Le Monde à côté* the inspiration for *La Mère du printemps* is attributed to Naqishbendi, as just noted, it actually comes from a piece entitled "La Mer" played by the Iraqi lute player Mounir Bachir. One important musical aspect of *La Mère du printemps* is the inclusion in the novel of musical notes on a staff, not only as the character Naqishbendi accompanies the arrival of 'Uqba on a lute, but also to render the *Chanson de la Pêche*, a fishing song whose lyrics were forgotten by the Amazigh character Yerma Aït Yafelman, and which became a wordless melody.

Music, then, as a mode of expression beyond words, takes on a new meaning. It not only serves to unlock the author's writing block, but also provides a metaphor for the continuation of an Amazigh voice after it is silenced by the Arabs' arrival. In addition to the symbolism of Yerma's forgetting the words to her song, a literal manifestation of this silencing occurs when Azwaw's tongue is cut out after his conversion to Islam, and he is reduced to wordlessness when he is discovered using the call to prayer to send coded messages to Amazigh peoples allied against the Arabs. Azwaw's heavily symbolic aphasia reinforces the notion that the Amazigh voice in North Africa's Islamic history and present identity has been silenced. Yet *La Mère du printemps* makes the point that both in early Islamic history and in the present, Amazigh presence is stronger than one cares to hear.

In the opening chapters of *La Mère du printemps*, Amazigh people in the present day are shown to understand their own practice of Islam to be inadequate and not quite as thorough as it should be. Raho Aït Yafelman considers that there is a hierarchical structure within Islam: "There were two Islams, one of the privileged and the other ..." ⁴⁰ Raho clearly considers himself to belong to the "other" Islam. He blames his own uncivilized pagan forces when he declares that he has blasphemed. At the same time, he attempts to improve by self-discipline:

[Raho] spit [sic] between his feet, to root out the Middle Ages that survived in him despite generations of Islam. He was not at all a Muslim worthy of the name, that's the truth of it! He still had to master his pagan forces ... ⁴¹

Raho's acknowledgement of his situation as a Muslim not quite worthy of the name reflects the common derogatory views of Islamic religious practices in Africa in

general, which imply that a singular, necessarily Arab, religious culture is valid, while all others are naïve and perpetually in the process of seeking to measure up to the ideal version of this imported system of belief.

Nevertheless, later in the novel and some centuries earlier, when Raho's homonymous ancestor warns his clan of the danger of the approaching Arab army, Azwaw accepts the inevitable with an odd serenity, "Yes, indeed, let the Arabs come! Standing in his boat, Azwaw awaits them. Everything is peaceful around him and inside him."⁴² Rather than see the conquest as a defeat, Azwaw has the serene assurance that time is on his side. Through this character, Chraïbi reveals some of his theoretical insights into the repercussions of the Arab assimilation of North Africa to the Islamic identity of the region.

Earlier in the novel, Azwaw justifies his serenity upon hearing the news of the westward advance of the Arab conquerors by noting that they are only the latest of many waves of conquerors, including the Romans and the Phoenicians, who had failed to overcome Amazigh peoples in any permanent manner.⁴³ Yet, he realizes later that these new invaders are unlike earlier conquerors because they are driven by a religion:

The other conquerors were interested in the earth and the riches of the earth, and I assure you that these Arabs are interested first and foremost in man, in what he is, and in what he can bring to them. They intermingle with the Berbers, in their blood, to found one single same tribe, the Oumma, as they call it.⁴⁴

Azwaw remains serene nonetheless. He is confident that when Arabs accept Amazigh converts into their religious community, it is the Arab community more than that of the new converts that is affected. He supports this argument with a botanical metaphor: weeds, representing Amazigh peoples, in the long run take over a field at the expense of other seeds, which represent Arabs:

We are going to occupy time's terrain. We are going to get inside these new conquerors, inside their very soul, into their Islam, their customs, their language, into everything that they know how to do with their hands and to say with their hearts. Into everything that is youthful, strong, and beautiful. We will slowly sap their vigour and then their life.⁴⁵

In spite of an apparent Arab victory and the conversion to Islam that would ensue, the Amazigh will prevail because through miscegenation, both literal and cultural,

these Arab colonizers will be assimilated into the people that they colonize rather than the other way around. Azwaw tells his clansmen:

The Arabs may be happy with us, once we become Muslims like them. They will let their guard down and will let us live and procreate. We will doubtlessly never be their equals. It is the law of domination that makes things go ... Our sons will join with their daughters, and our daughters, with their sons. Every child that is born will be a Berber in blood and heart for us, even if he [doesn't carry] the name of his father ... As for our land, you all know it. You are its sons. It loves only its children. It is savage and beautiful, and very strong, stronger than all the invaders that wanted to dominate her in the past. She has been their cemetery. The Arabs will fatten it with their cadavers and the cadaver of Islam one day soon, in a few centuries. Their last descendants, if there are any, will only turn toward the past of their ancestors, and that day, we, the Imazighen, we will be the future.⁴⁶

Therein is the novel's contribution not only to Islamic North African history but also to postcolonial theory. While historians have tended to quantify Amazigh contributions to the Arab victories in North Africa in terms of conversions and military deputation, Chraïbi sees these contributions rather as Arab losses, and gives credit to the Amazigh for Islam as we know it today in the Maghreb. If we view this from a postcolonial perspective, it is tempting to recall the well-worn concept of hybridity (especially in view of Chraïbi's choice of a botanical metaphor), and possibly view Amazigh Islam, at best, as a frail attempt at adopting an imposed Arab culture in which the colonized Amazigh "mimic" the colonizing Arabs by adopting their religion, language, and mores. Certainly, Chraïbi's portrayal of Raho praying reveals his view that present-day Amazigh Islam is perceived as a meek imitation of an imagined genuine article, necessarily different from it, and, in this case, undoubtedly inferior to it. Nevertheless, in Azwaw's outlook (and the source of his serenity), this imitation is declared as the transformation of the victor, effectively disarming the would-be conquerors. Affirming that the Amazigh will prevail within Islam implies that the Arabs will not.

The way that Chraïbi presents this process thwarts simplistic postcolonial readings of Islam's spread through the Maghreb. Instead of seeing the incorporation of an Amazigh component into a broader Islamic imperial project as the victory of Arab colonialism in which the colonized Amazigh inherit a crossbred cultural identity, he sees it as precisely the opposite: the ultimate continuation of an indigenous North African character through the inclusion of Amazigh elements within Islam. If the

arrival of Islam in North Africa is an Arab colonial enterprise, annexing North Africa to the Arab world, then it constitutes a complete incorporation of the colonized subject's identity into the ideological discourse that dominates him – in this case the supremacy of Islam and Arab culture. This goes beyond the mere physical occupation of his land, because it is not erased by subsequent national or colonial projects such as French occupation. This dimension of the novel is particularly important because it complements historical scholarship, in which researchers have portrayed the assimilation of Amazigh peoples and their role in securing an Islamic presence in North Africa – namely in the settlements in Kairouan as well as in subsequent campaigns, including the conquest of Andalusia – mainly in terms of conversion and recruitment into Islamic armies,⁴⁷ rather than in terms of cultural contributions and transformations.

Chraïbi could be criticized for his essentialist representation of Amazigh peoples in *La Mère du printemps* and his other novels centering on Amazigh characters, and possibly for appropriating and trivializing Amazigh aspects of Morocco's cultural heritage, particularly considering that the emergence of French and Arabic language literatures in North Africa in the last century relegated Amazigh literatures, which mostly exist in the realm of oral expression, to a lesser standing. Nonetheless, in his treatment of Amazigh characters, Chraïbi brings out the significance of an insufficiently addressed dimension in the Islamic identity of North Africa. A good example of this debate can be found in an interview with Kacem Basfao that appeared in a special Chraïbi issue of the bilingual literary magazine *Lecture/Qirā'āt* published after the author's death in 2007.⁴⁸ Kacem Basfao, professor at Ain Chock University in Casablanca, a leading scholar on Chraïbi and longtime personal friend of the author, was asked about a possibly "occidental" perspective in novels such as *Une enquête au pays*, where small rural villages in Morocco are described as if they are isolated from the rest of the world.⁴⁹ In answer, Basfao argues that Chraïbi's description does not portray rural Morocco in an essentialist way, but that through his Amazigh characters he attempts to address humanist themes. Moreover, Basfao claims, Chraïbi's descriptions are not very far from a certain reality, as some rural areas in Morocco were in fact neglected by the political administration in the 1980s when *Une Enquête au pays* is set, and some villages in these areas suffered from a form of isolation similar to that portrayed in the novel.⁵⁰

Although Chraïbi's use of Amazigh characters could indeed be read as a form of essentialism – be it an essentialist, reductionist view of Amazigh peoples, Morocco, the Maghreb at large, or Islam as a religion – it remains mainly an attempt to free North African identity from a marginalizing, Arab-centric view on Islam. Certainly,

in view of the fact that Morocco's literary scene is too often reduced to two, mutually-exclusive linguistic spheres, one Arabic and the other Francophone, when Amazigh peoples are portrayed as anti-Arabs, especially by an author who writes in French, the picture that emerges can be read as anti-Arab, serving Arabophobe agendas. However, *La Mère du printemps* is also a literary attempt to rectify official North African histories that largely overlook the importance of Amazigh peoples, a crucial issue for revivalist cultural movements that, as Bruce Maddy-Weitzman has pointed out, prioritize memory work.⁵¹ Through the inversion of official history, and a narration from an Amazigh perspective, Chraïbi reconstructs a cultural, national, and religious Amazigh element in an attempt to undermine the hegemony of the Arab component of North Africa's identity and reflect the complexity of the region. "Amazigh," then, is used conceptually as an indigenous African and pre-Islamic character, and put forth to validate a crucial aspect of North Africa not simply insofar as it is contrapuntal to an exogenous (Arab) religion, but as a factor in shaping the destiny of that religion in the region.

As the portrayal of the Islamization of North Africa in *La Mère du printemps* emphasizes an Africanization of Islam (or rather, to be precise, its "Amazighation" in this case), it reminds the reader that Islam in North Africa, which is thought of as exclusively Arab, is in fact largely Amazigh as well and remains engaged in a dynamic of ongoing configuration. The value of the Amazigh portrayal in *La Mère du printemps*, then, is its reminder that although the arrival of Islam in North Africa resulted in the region's being defined chiefly as a part of the Arab world, it is not exclusively Arab, as pre-Islamic and pre-Arab elements are in effect a crucial component of the character of North African peoples and are presented as fundamental to the vitality of the religion in the area.

By validating a non-Arab Islam, Chraïbi contributes to the formation of a Moroccan identity that remains relevant in circumstances of North African deviation from the Arab world. Such deviation can occur as a result of political events, such as shifting international alliances since the mid-Twentieth Century CE in contexts of the Cold War, oil crises and embargos, post-9/11 tensions, and conflicts in the Middle East. From a literary perspective, the rejection of imposed Arabic standards when they do not validate North African varieties of the language – incidentally, an issue particularly relevant to Chraïbi as well as to other authors from the Maghreb who write in French – can also foster anti-Arab sentiments. In these cases of North African deviation from the Arab world, the necessity of retaining Islam remains, if not because religion is foundational to national identity, or to avoid the real dangers of the legal and social repercussions of apostasy, then only out of sincere and genuine

faith. From *La Mère du printemps* (and other works such as *L'Homme du livre*), it appears that Chraïbi seems to lean towards the latter reason. Thus, he fits in the tradition of Muslim historians chronicling the Westward expansion of the religion, embellishing that narrative with his version of horse-back rides into the waves of the Atlantic, and marveling at the destiny of the land.

Notes

- 1 Driss Chraïbi, *La Mère du printemps* (Paris: Seuil, 2001).
- 2 David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 27–59.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 74–88.
- 6 A term referring initially to present-day Tunisia, coming from the Latin appellation of the southern Mediterranean coast; it was initially applied only to North Africa but the entire continent later took the name.
- 7 Jonathan Brockopp, *Early Mālikī Law: Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam and his Major Compendium of Jurisprudence* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2.
- 8 Charles Torrey, *The History of the Conquest of Egypt, North Africa and Spain Known as the Futūḥ Miṣr of Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922).
- 9 Alfred Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 246; ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Dhannūn Taha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain* (London: Routledge, 1989), 55.
- 10 Torrey, 56–57.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 12 Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 93.
- 13 Taha, 58.
- 14 Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi, *Al-Bayān al-Mughrib fī Akhbār al-Andalus wa al-Maghrib*, eds. G.S. Colin and E. Lévi-Provençal (Leiden: Brill, 1948).
- 15 Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi, 27.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 17 Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2007), 208.

- 18 E. Lévi-Provençal, "Un Nouveau récit de la conquête de l'Afrique du nord par les Arabes (A new story of the conquest of North Africa by the Arabs)," *Arabica* (Jan. 1954): 17–52, 26, 29.
- 19 Torrey, 195.
- 20 Kennedy, 209–210.
- 21 Torrey, 196.
- 22 Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi, 20.
- 23 Torrey, 199.
- 24 Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi, 27.
- 25 Driss Chraïbi, *Mother Spring*, trans. Hugh Harter (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1989).
- 26 Driss Chraïbi, *Le Passe Simple* (*The Simple Past*) (Paris: Gallimard, 1954).
- 27 Pierre Vermeren. *Histoire du Maroc depuis l'indépendance* (*The History of Morocco since Independence*) (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 111.
- 28 Carine Bourget, "L'Islam Syncrétique de Driss Chraïbi," *L'Esprit Créateur* 38.1 (Spring 1998): 57–68.
- 29 Paris: Seuil, 2001.
- 30 Jeanne Fouet. *Driss Chraïbi en marges* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 59.
- 31 Bourget, 57.
- 32 The sequel, *Naissance à l'aube*, is a re-telling of the conquest of Andalusia.
- 33 Violeta Baena Gallé. "L'Universalisation actantielle dans la trilogie tellurique de Driss Chraïbi." *Presence Francophone* 54 (2000): 41–64.
- 34 Chraïbi, 80.
- 35 Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi, 27.
- 36 Driss Chraïbi, *Le Monde à côté* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).
- 37 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 38 Stéphanie Delayre, *Driss Chraïbi, une écriture de traverse* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2006).
- 39 Delayre, 265, describing an interview Delayre conducted with Chraïbi on May 7th, 2001.
- 40 Chraïbi, 4.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 47 Taha, 61–62, 76.

- 48 Kacem Basfao. "Interview. Hommage à Driss Chraïbi." *Special issue of Lecture/Qirā'āt* 1 (Nov 2007): 6–7.
- 49 Ibid., 6.
- 50 Ibid., 6–7.
- 51 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Berber/Amazigh Memory Work," in *The Maghrib in the New Century: Identity, Religion, and Politics*, eds. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisewine (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007): 50–72, 51.

