Colonial al-Andalus: Spain and the making of modern Moroccan culture

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Author: Eric Calderwood
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In Colonial Al-Andalus, Professor Eric Calderwood explores the origin of a claim widely promoted in Moroccan tourism, arts, and literature and finds its roots in Spain’s colonial rhetoric. Modern Spain is rarely considered for its role in shaping Arabic literary and intellectual history, and thus the idea that Morocco is the cultural and spiritual extension of Medieval Islamic Spain (al-Andalus) has not previously been examined in conjunction with the Spanish Protectorate’s cultural politics. While it is notoriously difficult to prove the origin of ideas, the book’s multilingual journey between Spanish texts, speeches, and institutions alongside concurrent Arabic sources manages to show how Moroccan texts end up reproducing Spanish colonial claims – even those which are apparently anticolonial. Calderwood’s efforts to consider forms of cultural and intellectual exchange which are often sidelined in other historiographies – particularly the transperipheral and the transcolonial – make this a worthwhile and engaging read whose methods can be applied to new areas of inquiry.

While the memory of al-Andalus was and is kept alive through a variety of cultural practices including architecture, cuisine, music, and visual art, it is literary history which dominates Colonial al-Andalus. Calderwood alternates between Spanish and Moroccan texts, along with one chapter foregrounding the revival of Andalusian arts in the Spanish Protectorate. He analyses each endeavour within larger cultural contexts, and is careful to consider both the authors’ sponsoring institutions and what they may have had to gain from a particular interpretation of al-Andalus. Calderwood describes his ‘thick reading’ methodology as a combination of Said’s philological approach to close textual analysis and Geertz’s ethnology of ‘thick description.’ This method appears useful for future research into forgotten cultural histories.

The first Moroccan texts analysed are a poem and a chronicle by al-Mufad’il Afayla?l (1824–87) which both respond to the 1860 Spanish occupation of Tetouan and reflect a memory of al-Andalus predating the Spanish Protectorate’s propaganda. This chapter has strong relevance for experts of Arabic literature regardless of their regional focus, as Calderwood discusses Afayla?l’s work in the context of broader problems within the field. He points out how the dominant historiography of Arabic literature reduces all of the 19th century to a few works by Egyptian and Levantine authors who appropriate and translate European texts, and the subsequent gap this leaves in Moroccan literary history in particular. Calderwood explains, ‘I
want to problematize the dichotomy between literary “tradition” and literary “modernity” by showing how Afayla?l is not merely recycling Andalusi poetry but rather is adapting and molding it to a new cultural context’ (p. 11). The reduction of worthy Arabic literature to only that which is ‘modern’ is a critique which has been made before, but Calderwood builds on it effectively.[1] In a later chapter devoted to Spanish dictator Francisco Franco’s efforts to sponsor pilgrimages to Mecca, he collapses the assumption that ‘modern’ texts necessarily supplant ‘traditional’ texts: ‘Instead of treating [traditional texts] as vestiges of a dying literary order or as stepping stones on the path to full-fledged modernity, I propose that we allow texts like al-Rahuni’s journey to point us toward other epistemic and discursive modes that coincide with and even exert force over literary forms that we have normalized as “modern”’ (p. 145). Scholars of Arabic literature and particularly literary historians are advised to read the chapter ‘Franco’s Hajj’, or at the very least its conclusion (pp. 163–6).

Although the Spanish Protectorate was established in Morocco in 1912 and Spain first occupied Tetouan in 1860, Colonial al-Andalus locates the most enduring and concentrated efforts to exploit al-Andalus in the service of Spanish colonialism in Francisco Franco’s regime (1936–56 in Northern Morocco; lasting until 1975 in the Spanish Sahara). During the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) Franco actively courted the favor of Moroccan and Arab intellectuals, sponsoring delegations of Moroccan pilgrims to Mecca[2] and hosting Arab dignitaries in the rebel capital. His army also successfully recruited 80,000 Moroccan soldiers to fight against the Spanish Republican Government (p. 9).

Ironically, one of the most influential predecessors to Francoist colonial rhetoric is a man who died at the hands of Franco’s fascist regime: Blas Infante (1885–1936), known as the father of Andalucían nationalism. Infante’s andalucismo was built around the idea that the history of religious diversity in the Andalucía region made it tolerant and welcoming in an essentialist manner, and that the region was fundamentally different from Europe (p. 127). Through comparing Infante’s work with Catalonian nationalist ideas, Calderwood shows that transperipheral exchange actually exerted more influence on Infante than did dominant Castilian narratives of Spain and Spanishness. It is important to note that the andalucismo brand of tolerance and multiculturalism still coexisted easily with expansionist rhetoric: Infante stated that knowledge of Southern Spain’s history ‘justifies our aspiration of getting to restablish our cultural unity with the Orient’ (p. 131). His idea of an Andalusian diaspora encompassing both Arabs and the Spanish from Andalucía from was further cemented by his encounters with Moroccans who claimed Andalusian roots. This particular aspect of Infante’s career seems worthy of elaboration: how exactly did Infante make contact with Andalusian-identifying Moroccans? How did he communicate with them? Did he have any access to Arabic texts, sayings, or poetry which referenced al-Andalus? In turn, did any Maghribis respond to Infante’s andalucismo? Or was Infante, like the other Spanish authors studied in Colonial al-Andalus, namely using Morocco and Moroccans as props to confirm what he already believed based on European Orientalist narratives?

Whatever the limitations and biases of Infante’s andalucismo, it is nonetheless a sad irony that his work was appropriated by the regime responsible for his death. Rodolfo Gil Benumeyya (born Rodolfo Gil Torres) took up the mantle of andalucismo after the end of the Spanish Civil War, linking it more explicitly to Spain’s right to occupy Morocco in works such as Ni Oriente, ni Occidente (‘Neither Orient nor Occident’, 1930). He stated that the Iberian Peninsula stretches across the strait of Gibraltar and ends at the Atlas Mountains (p. 134). Benumeyya also further developed the idea that Spain occupies a space between Europe and Africa, is spiritually both and neither, and thus is better suited to rule Morocco than France is.
One of recurring themes in Colonial al-Andalus is how the transcolonial shaped the idea of Hispano-Arab culture and its attendant policies. Spain constantly set itself up in opposition to France: France was after profit whereas Spain was after cultural revival; France attempted to divide Arabs and Amazighen (Berbers), whereas Spain respected Moroccan unity; France weakened Islam and Arabic within Morocco, whereas Spain strengthened them through their cultural and educational policies (p. 168). A consequence of this dynamic is that acknowledging Amazigh culture and language became coded as enabling French colonialism, and thus there was no place for Amazigh in Hispano-Arab culture.

To return to the rih?la quoted earlier, this text opens a larger discussion of pilgrimage and colonial policies, and how Arabic travel narratives could be put to the service of colonialism. Al-Rih?lah al-makki?yah was written by the Tetouani scholar Ah?mad al-Rahu?ni? al-Tit?wa?ni? (1871–1953), who was chosen to lead a Franco-sponsored delegation on hajj during the Spanish Civil War. In his account of his 1936 pilgrimage, which was published by the General Franco Institute for Hispano-Arab Research, Al-Rahu?ni? makes the culmination of his narrative not his arrival in Mecca, but rather the reception Franco hosts for the returned pilgrims in Seville, effectively making Spain and its cities of former Andalusian glory part of the pan-Islamic imagined geography (p. 153). According to Calderwood’s evaluation, al-Rahu?ni? serves his colonial sponsor well: not only does his travelogue promote fascist Spain as a friend to the Muslim World, but it also assigns the Spanish Civil War a more international significance. Instead of portraying the war as one fought between rival Spanish factions, al-Rahu?ni? paints it as pious followers of the Abrahamic religions against Godless communists. This chapter sheds light on a text which deserves attention, but it would be interesting to know more about the travelogue’s reception. Does al-Rahu?ni? set a precedent for how pilgrims leaving from Tetouan and Tangier narrate the hajj? Do we have any sense of how Al-Rih?lah al-makki?yah was read and replicated in Morocco and other parts of the Arabophone World? Does it seem like al-Rahu?ni? responds to rih?las from the French Protectorate (such as Idr?s al-Ju?ayd? al-Salw?’s 1930 pilgrimage) in the same manner that Spain responds to French colonial policy? For example, Ma?? al-?Aynayn Ibn al-?Ati?q’s 1938 pilgrimage account which starts in the Spanish Sahara includes praise for the Spanish government’s sponsorship of a steamship, but its portrayal of Seville is brief and vague, and it makes no mention of al-Andalus or cultural revival[3].

Franco’s Hispano-Arab cultural institutes and policies eventually reached beyond Morocco, as the participation of Lebanese-American intellectual and literary figure Ami?n al-Ri?h?a?ni? shows. In 1940, the General Franco Institute for Hispano-Arab Culture sponsored a visit by the bilingual and binational al-Ri?h?a?ni?, who went on to write an account titled Al-Maghrib al-Aqsa. This 400-page tome replicates much of the Francoist rhetoric surrounding Spain’s colonization of Morocco: that Spain was not interested in material gain, that Arabic culture was reaching a renaissance under the regime, that the Spanish and Moroccans are racially linked, and that Spanish colonialism is better than French colonialism. In the shadow of the 1930 Berber Dahir which set up a separate judicial system for Amazighen in the French Protectorate, al-Ri?h?a?ni? lavishes praise on Spanish schools for teaching the Rifian Amazigh population in Arabic. He repeats the theme of renaissance often, describing:

‘Back when Morocco was like a question mark in my mind, it was said to me that in Morocco there was a nationalist, cultural, civilization, and political renaissance, which was being encouraged and supported by a foreign ruler who loved the people of the country, the Moroccan Arabs, with a sincere love and protected their interests with a fraternal, “Arab” zeal’ (quoted p. 194).

During the same event in which Ami?n al-Ri?h?a?ni? gives a speech about the dual Spanish-Arab renaissances, High Commissioner Juan Beigbeder refers to the defeat of the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War as ‘a bilingual victory,’ despite the fact that the majority of the Moroccan recruits were actually Amazigh speakers from the Rif region. Calderwood ascertains that this was another attempt to differentiate Spain from France and its Berber obsession (p. 185). The idea of ‘the Berber question’ must have registered a response on the ground, and it would be pertinent to know whether Moroccan intellectuals in the Spanish protectorate- some of whom must have identified as Amazigh or spoken the language- were
fairly united in their opposition of an Amazigh identity and written language. We know a lot about the backlash against the Berber Dahir, but was there any visible native support for it?

The final chapter of Colonial al-Andalus shows how Spain’s own mythology - coupled with policies which encouraged Moroccan nationalist parties and newspapers - eventually allowed colonial rhetoric to become nationalist and anticolonial. This chapter centers the famous Lebanese literary figure and pan-Islamic activist Shaki?b Arsla?n’s travels in Spain and Spanish-controlled Morocco for the lasting impact this had on the articulation of Moroccan nationalism. When Arsla?n (1869–1946) set out for Morocco in 1930 he was officially banned from French Morocco, but the cultural and political leader ?Abd al-Sala?m Binu?nah (1888–1935) was able to negotiate his entrance into the Spanish Zone. In Tangier and Tetouan, Arsla?n is received by both Moroccan and Spanish dignitaries, including Andalucía nationalist Isidro de las Cagigas (257–8). While Arsla?n during his visit emphasizes ‘the ancient ties between the Arab and Spanish nations and the necessity of the two being tightly interwoven’ (p. 259), his mentees go on to give a new meanings to al-Andalus. Ah?mad Bala?fri?j (1908–1990), in describing Shaki?b Arsla?n’s trip to Spain, suggests that it was Morocco where he found the Andalus he was seeking, as in Spain these monuments are alienated from their people. In the same article, Arsla?n himself states: ‘After seeing the land of al-Andalus, which I consider to be an Islamic land without Muslims … I was delighted when I arrived in North Africa, whose sights awakened a nostalgia in me for my land and my brothers’ (cited p. 261). While Arsla?n’s work emphasized the loss of al-Andalus, his mentee Muh?ammad Da?wu?d (1901– 1984) went on to emphasize its migration to Northern Morocco – thus Tetouan becomes ‘the daughter of Granada’ (p. 268). Later Moroccan nationalists, many of whom were educated in Spanish schools, coded al-Andalus as namely Moroccan rather than pan-Islamic.

Colonial al-Andalus is effective in bringing to life sidelined and forgotten historical relationships, and the book does lead the reader to question assumed oppositions between Spain and Morocco, colonial and anticolonial, and traditional and modern. While Spanish cultural policies in the Spanish Sahara and their afterlife are left out of this volume, Colonial al-Andalus paves the way for this line of inquiry as well as many others.

Notes

[1] Wail S. Hassan has also pointed out the Orientalist nature of the tradition-modernity dichotomy and called instead for a literary history based on continuities (Hassan 2017, p. 21), and Roger Allen observed that shunning texts labelled imitative or traditional has created a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby ‘an almost complete lack of sympathy for very different aesthetic norms has been converted into a tradition of scholarly indifference’ (Allen 2006, p. 2).

[2] See Dieste 2017


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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298828