

ALI EL KENZ

J. BERQUE. The man between two shores.

1910, Frenda (Algeria) - 1995, Saint-Julien-en-Born, Landes (France). Two dates, two locations that span the 20th century and the two shores of the Mediterranean and which fully embrace the life of Jacques Berque. He has fulfilled this time and these places better than anyone.

Fifty books, written in French and translated into Arabic of course, and in other regional languages (Italian, Spanish, Greek) but also in English, German etc... There are also those whom he himself translated from Arabic and not the least is the Kitab al-Aghani "poetry of Adonis" and especially the Koran that he will resume indefinitely until his death. He left nearly 200 articles and has directed some fifty researches that began to be classified and published as the three volumes of "Opera Minora, Bouchene editions, Paris.

We can not account for the immense work of the scholar without linking it to his own life and understanding the one through the other ; the objects of his research by his route and tumult, the style of his writing by his appetite for words and languages. The French one he conducted with art, the many dialects Arab and Arab-Berber that he eventually differentiated according to their music, and the language of the Koran which he succeeded to penetrate, hermeneutical as he is, into some of its more confusing metaphors.

Let first observe the man. This is a rebel! At 20 years old on the advice of his father, a colonial administrator and anthropologist at spared times, he went to Paris for an aggregation in classics at the Sorbonne. After two years of residence in Paris which "bored" him, he returns "home", at Frenda. We are in 1932.

Then his father sent him to one of his friends, head of a tribe in the highlands of Hodna. There he lives in tents, covering plains on horseback, and already, watching and sharing the daily lives of people of the tribe. He won't change this posture and this method : for those who want to know, the best way to understand them is to make people accept oneself. A better analysis will come later. Exit the "objectification", this methodological dogma of classical sociology, which moves away from the current positivist sociology in France.

In 1934 he was appointed civil administrator and then controller of indigenous Moroccan courts and finally, municipal deputy in Fez. From 1946 to 1953 he was forced to stay in a district of the Moroccan High Atlas, with explicit instruction not leave. This means that there he was summoned home. His reformist impulses had been in conflict with the colonial administration. During this period, he travelled all over the cities and douars in Morocco, studying the "legal order" which organizes social relations. Observing the way the cadis implemented rules and customs and the adjustments they made to comply with Muslim Sharia law, he is the first to decipher this strange equation which had baffled the classical Orientalist clinging to pieces of orthodoxy (the Sunnah) and anthropologists who were unable to ascend from the observation of the "field" to the texts that they did not know. It was at the University of Fez, "el Quaraouine" that he will understand and analyze this curious mixture of "loyalty" to the texts and infinitesimal innovations imposed by practical conflicts of society. His text about the "Amal" is a jewel in the legal interpretation of the Sharia grappling with life.

In 1955 he composed his famous thesis on "the social structures of the High Atlas", which closed this masterfully maghrebine period, that of Berque the anthropologist. He is then sent on mission by René Maheu, Director General of Unesco, in Egypt and Lebanon. A new period opens, both in terms of "places" of the investigation, the Mashreq (Middle East) and in terms of centers of interest, history, classical literature, policy analysis. In 1957, he was appointed to the College de France and held the chair in social history of Islam until his retirement in 1980. From this date, he was involved in the knowledge of the Middle East so much so that he abandoned his work on legal anthropology in Maghreb. Caught in the turmoil of decolonization, sometimes in direct player, he became one of the best and most respected politic sociologist in the Arab world doubled from a historian and a literary critic ever. Ironically, he discovered, insightful and daring, important differences, between this region and the Maghreb. He even helped intellectuals to discover it and this go-between from South to North became also a go-between from West to East, from Maghreb to Mashreq.

From 1980 until his death in 1995, he will live his "retirement" in the full and ancient sense of the word : understanding and translating some of the finest pieces of Arabic literature and what better way to discover "the inside Islam", than to attempt the translation of its book, the Koran. This is the third and final period, which took him away from the earthbound tumult and brought him closer to religious and spiritual questions ; and here he is, this confirmed Christian, immersed in the understanding of Islam, but not from the bottom, on the ground of anthropology or of political conflicts of decolonization and development ; this time it will be from the top, by the transcendence of the founding text.

But one should make no mistake: Berque is not inclined to asceticism and took this religion, "Yousr" that is its permissiveness towards the earthly life which equilibrate the balance of duties and penalties, "el'osr". He also liked to repeat the hadith: "When you feel no shame, then act as you wish."

"Islam, this is the impetus of a Savoyard vicar graced with the joys of life."

To finish like an orientalist - when he had criticized his illustrious predecessors which he admired, for the anthropological limits of their knowledge - may seem paradoxical! But the paradox is only apparent. This is not the scriptural knowledge of Islam and ancient texts, which was perfect, that he criticized but their dismissive indifference and therefore also their ignorance of real societies in which the symbolic order was embodied.

In the opposite direction, moreover, he had expressed great disdain and sometimes bad mood against "anthropologists" who cared only "to the field practices" and ignored the languages and dialects delegating this role of "translation" to informants.

Orientalist indeed, but only in the end, because then it becomes possible to question the ground through the text, the practice and its symbolic order, and to be helped if necessary with history and comparisons.

Berque, an anthropologist, a historian and an orientalist, so he liked to present himself.

J. Berque, the Virgil we needed, to guide to visitors travelling on the banks of the Loire, to the IEA.