

The Disjunction of “Black” and “White” Africa:

The Case of the Racist Campaign Against Sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES – ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent football game between Tunisia and Senegal, Senegalese players celebrated their victory by proudly pointing at the colour of their skin. The gesture comes following weeks of a fierce racist campaign against sub-Saharan African migrants in the country, resulting in many fleeing the country. Ensuingly, a boycott campaign against Tunisian products in certain sub-Saharan countries has been launched. A leaked internal document by the World Bank announced it is pausing its partnership with Tunisia over the State’s racist rhetoric and the attacks victimizing sub-Saharan Africans. Three African countries, Mali, Guinea and the Ivory Coast, have been organising voluntary repatriation for their nationals. While many have commented on the reasons behind such an episode, from Tunisian president Kais Saied’s escalating authoritarian populism to the Maghreb’s long history with antiblack racism, this article tackles the racial problematic in the larger continental drift between Africa’s north and south from both a present and historical perspective.

TUNISIA'S LOST AFRICANITY AND THE COUNTRY'S ROLE IN GATEKEEPING EUROPEAN BORDERS

On the 21st of February 2023, following what seemed like a routine national security council meeting, the Tunisian presidency published a communiqué regarding the so-called sub-Saharan African question in the country. The communiqué states “there is a criminal plot that aims to demographically modify the composition of the Tunisian society, that some parties received huge funds post-2011 in order to settle irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia”, pointing out “this unnatural situation” brought “hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa” to Tunisia, “with all the violence, crime, and unacceptable practices that entails”.¹ More noticeably, the communiqué states the aim of this “conspiracy against Tunisia” is that the country be considered African only, not belonging to the Arab Muslim nation.

The controversial presidential statement comes amidst what has been observed as an organised campaign against an alleged “settler-colonial project” by sub-Saharan African migrants, directly referencing the white supremacist plot of the Great Replacement popularised by western far-right figures such as Éric Zemmour in France.

The racist campaign has been initiated by the Tunisian nationalist party, a political party that obtained an official license in 2018. Since January of this year, it has been actively lobbying for the deportation of irregular sub-Saharan Africans and for the imposition of visas on all sub-Saharan African countries. Local authorities have welcomed the party's members. Furthermore, their racist speech has been echoed by a number of public personalities in television and radio appearances. Hundreds of social media pages have been active in relaying hate speech and misinformation against sub-Saharan Africans in the country, which resulted in many losing their jobs, their homes, being physically assaulted, and fleeing the country. The same month, Italy's interior minister and minister of foreign affairs visited Tunisia to discuss “reducing irregular immigration and boosting regular immigration”. Since its election, the new government vowed to stop the flow of migrants across the

¹<https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/tunisie-propos-racistes-et-theorie-du-grand-replacement-kais-saied-accable-les-migrants>

Mediterranean and has introduced a decree for NGOs limiting their rescue capacities at sea.

As I have noted in earlier work, the fact that a large number of sub-Saharan Africans work irregularly in Tunisia is mainly the result of State policies regarding work permits' allocation, added to the complicated and slow functioning of the country's bureaucracy. Between 2010 and 2017, the percentage of work permits allocated to sub-Saharan African migrants amidst foreigners oscillated between 2% and 4%. As a stark comparison, western Europeans benefited from 40% of all work permits allocated in 2017, followed by 31% for citizens from Arab countries.²

Tunisia seems to be following a logic linking the proportionality of States' foreign investments to the allocation of work permits for their nationals. European countries are Tunisia's most significant foreign investors. According to the 2019 data of the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA), France (171,860 million euros), followed by Germany (57,450 million euros), then Italy (55,220 million euros) are the three most significant foreign investors in the country. France alone holds 34% of the overall foreign investments in Tunisia. In contrast, a 2017 document published by the Tunisian Center for Export Promotion (CEPEX) indicated that the sub-Saharan African market only represents 2,2% of Tunisia's exportations compared to 73,7% destined for the EU. Tunisia is the 62nd supplier of sub-Saharan countries. In 2017, the European Union accounted for 85.5% of total inflows in Tunisia.

In exchange, there is a clear understanding that Tunisia, along with its North African neighbours, should play a major role in gatekeeping European borders, both through the repatriation of irregular Tunisian migrants and the containment of sub-Saharan African and Tunisian irregular migration towards Europe. The election of the Italian far right leader Giorgia Meloni in October 2022 prompted multiple visits from the Italian government to the country. Both France and Italy promised their support to Tunisia in obtaining the much-needed International Monetary Fund loan that has been postponed several times due to the country's political instability and difficulties in reaching an agreement with the powerful labour union UGTT.

² Yasmine Akrimi, "Between Securitisation and Racialisation: The Sub-Saharan African Experience in Tunisia." *FTDES*, (December 18, 2020), <https://ftdes.net/en/entre-securisation-et-racialisation-lexperience-subsaharienne-en-tunisie/>.

According to an investigation by the Italian newspaper *Rai News 24*, an agreement reached in August 2020 by Italy and Tunisia includes eight million euros for Tunisia's Coast Guard and 30 million euros over a three-year period (2021-2023) to help Tunisia combat migration. In March 2014, Tunisia signed agreements with the EU for the repatriation of irregular immigrants and to permanently host asylum seekers from other African countries. Tunis has always denied those deals, known as the EU-Tunisia Mobility Partnership – allegedly ratified by the European Union, ten EU member states and the then Tunisian ambassador to Belgium and the European Union, Tahar Cherif. Tunisia was, additionally, chosen to be a pilot country for the identification and implementation of regular migration schemes.

THE COLONIAL HANGOVER AND THE DISJUNCTION OF AFRICA

The border distinction between “black” and northern Africa, delimited by the Sahara, is rarely questioned in academia, political discourse and popular imaginative views. It perpetuates the long-standing rationale “that posits racial whiteness as indigenous to North Africa, racial Arabness as contributing to the maintenance of that whiteness, and racial blackness as non-indigenous.”³

Sudanese scholar Hassan Mohamed gives valuable insights into the colonial representation of Africa that he traces back to the European abolitionist movement.⁴ The colonial imaginary first distinguished between north and sub-Saharan Africa, and considers the latter the “real” Africa. In an analogy with the transatlantic slave trade and the African diaspora in the Americas, it then views black north African presence as stemming uniquely from a servile descent, forming a proper “African diaspora in Africa”, which discards any possibility of migration other than forced, and any black indigeneity to North Africa. Building on colonial ethnographers, Africanist scholars’ perception of the African black “as a creature of tropical bliss [...] [which] does not belong in the Mediterranean world” contributed to “the discursive assassination of the historicity of black Africans in the Maghrib”.

For scholars whose reference is the experience of black Africans in the Americas and thus the transatlantic slave trade, blacks could only be slaves, and their “encounter” with North Africa, deemed a voyage “out of Africa”, could only be in the form of

³ Leila Tayeb, “What Is Whiteness in North Africa?,” *Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 10, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.20>.

⁴ Mohamed Hassan Mohamed, “Africanists and Africans of the Maghrib: Casualties of Analogy,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 349–74.

servitude. It is crucial to note Africanists' hyper-focus on race has been shaping the way Africa is studied until today, equating being African with being black, "and, hence [blackness] [...] as a signifier of alterity to the Maghrib".

Abdelmajid Hannoum's compelling book "The Invention of the Maghreb" is amongst recent critical works to unveil the profound coloniality of the concepts and imaginaries we use and reproduce in our work on north Africa. Hannoum convincingly argues that the present "geographical, geopolitical, geocultural, and geostrategic imagination" of the Maghreb is the work of French colonial rule through what he terms colonial modernity, the "episteme [...] of recording a colony with a colonial mind."

Situating its onset between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century with Napoleon's *campagne d'Égypte* and the *Exploration scientifique* in Algeria, for Hannoum, "[t]he invention of the Maghreb is [...] a local transformation amidst global ones [...] made by powerful, already global colonial orders, some of them French, others British or Dutch, but all belonging to colonial modernity."

In the case of the Maghreb, the process of drastic transformation that led to its emergence as an independent geographic entity solely encompassing French colonies in northern Africa "divorced [it] from the larger region now referred to as the Middle East on one hand, and from the region commonly called Africa on the other", although the Maghreb remains understood as both "culturally Middle Eastern and geographically African".

The Maghreb as we know it is first a cartographic invention, with the "separation between North Africa, West Africa and East Africa [...] based less on local anthropological realities than on rivalries between colonial powers". Eighteenth-century European cartographers drew a region called "Barbary", sometimes divided into separate units⁵ from which Egypt and "Black Africa" (formerly called "*Nigritie*") were excluded.

Although the region did not wait until the 1830s to be mapped, France's colonisation of Algeria represented a turning point vis-à-vis the old maps. As the conquest progressed, the French presence in Algeria operated as an argument for the colonial empire to expand to Tunisia at the expense of Italy, and to Morocco at the expense

⁵ Kingdom of Morocco, Kingdom of Algiers, Kingdom of Tunis, and Kingdom of Tripoli.

of Spain. The maps soon represented a North Africa from which Libya (under Italian rule) and Egypt (under British rule) were excluded. In other words, the Maghreb patterned on French possessions. New denominations appeared to attach northern Africa to Europe, and arguably whiteness, and detach it from the rest of the continent: *Afrique Septentrionale*, *Afrique Méditerranéenne*, *Afrique Blanche*, *Afrique Européenne*. After 1870, colonial civil agents replaced military power, and historians replaced ethnographic officers of the Arab bureaus. This set in motion what Hannoum calls the historiographic state, which not merely transformed Algeria into a French territory, but laid the semantic foundations of the region now known as the Maghreb, resulting in new evidence, “independent of human consciousness”.

Hannoum notably contrasts the modern technologies of power used by French colonial rule with the functioning of the Ottoman state. The Ottomans did not develop methods of power based on a historical narrative of the societies under the *Sublime Porte's* rule. History took the form of chronicles or annals, but was not an instrument for nation-building. In the Ottoman provinces, history remained an auxiliary of religion, “not [...] an instrumental discipline in the making of nationhood and statehood, neither [...] the basis of modern governmentality – that is, the management of populations.”

Another modern technology of power mobilised was archaeology. The colonial administration’s investment in studying Roman ruins in Algeria crafted the latter as an extension of Rome and, hence, of France. The colonial administration made extensive use of “local geographic and Islamic knowledge”, notably through translating Arab authors. As translated texts had to be intelligible for nineteenth-century Europe and fit into preexisting geographical and racial categories, translation obeyed specific rules that “domesticated” what came to be known as “modern knowledge”. In the translation of Ibn Abi Dinar’s work under the title *Histoire de l’Afrique*, new racialised categories were created that do not exist in the original Arabic text: *pays des nègres* (countries of the Negroes) in lieu of *Bilad al-Sudan* (for Hannoum, the land of Sudan, i.e., Mali); the Mediterranean Sea (unknown before the nineteenth century) which, for Reclus, is “[a junction] between Aryans, Semites, and Berbers” while Abi Dinar evokes *al-bahr al-châmî* (the sea of the Levant); a sand border between Ifriqiya and the *pays des nègres* although in the original Arabic text “Ifriqiya touches *bilâd al-sudân*” and might even be part of it. These textual adaptations laid the foundation for a racialised geography through which “the Maghreb has a geographical limit, the sands, and a racial limit, blackness.” This newly enacted

imaginary “put the region within the sphere of France (i.e. Mediterranean) [and] separate[d] the region from the rest of Africa.”

The Desert of Barbary, i.e. the Sahara, was crucial to the racialised geography hegemonised by European colonialism starting from the eighteenth century. In preparation of the conquest of its desert plains, French colonial rule depicted the Sahara as a fertile component of north Africa, not merely a buffer zone, thus rendering it “colonisable”.

After its successful military conquest, the focus turned to painting the desert as a delimitation zone with West Africa which although “[...] integrated within the region, nevertheless constituted its limit and its frontiers, like the Mediterranean itself [...] It is the same Sahara that unified the region in colonial times, and it is also the same Sahara that disunited it in the postcolonial era.” The “no man’s land” narrative “bracketed [northern Africa] [...] between civilization (Europe) and Barbary (the desert), between the white man to the north and the black man to the south, but also, perhaps more importantly, between emptiness and not, between infertility and the potential for (colonial) productivity, between resources and scarcity, between life and death.”

The Sahara’s racialised function was clear from the onset of the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt as “a visual limit between “Barbary” and the “countries of the Negroes,” an empty space, the same way that the Mediterranean appears as the sea wall that separates Europe from Africa, Islam from Christianity, and soon with Napoleon the white man from his racial others.”

It is important to understand that defining a region by its race is a modern colonial introduction as “[...] neither in the Roman definition nor in the Arab one is there any mention of white as an adjective describing the region [...]. Even though occasional reference to color and phenotypes existed in Roman times as well as in its Islamic period, the region was never defined by its color.”

These colonial conceptions remain clearly relevant today. The Tunisian president’s use of a white supremacist conspiracy theory in an official communiqué as well as the easiness through which violence was subsequently unleashed on sub-Saharan migrants can be fully understood only through considering north Africa’s role in upholding racist migratory policies. More than ever, the racial fracture between the continent’s north and south is an issue to urgently address..

CONCLUSION

Looking at history allows to explain what might seem absurd, or isolated. This article focused on one dimension of the disjunction of Africa, the racial fracture fomented by the continent's postcolonial legacy. On a regional level, the Maghreb has a long history of racial prejudice against blacks⁶ conjugated with its active role in the externalisation of European borders to southern Mediterranean countries. On a national level, there is the mounting authoritarianism of Tunisia's current regime⁷⁸ and its constant reliance on conspiracy theories as a justification to the country's deepening socioeconomic crisis. Ultimately, the naturalized geographic distinction along the Sahara is amongst factors that still prevent a genuine African Union.

⁶ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/slavery-and-colonialism-legacy-racialization-maghreb>

⁷ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/index.php/research/tunisias-constitutional-referendum-controversial-process>

⁸ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/tunisie-de-la-revolution-de-2011-la-chute-de-la-iieme-republique>

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