

AL-ARABIYYAH, LE FRANÇAIS, AND THE HEART AND SOUL OF ALGERIA:
THE LANGUAGE TANGO BETWEEN ARABIC AND FRENCH IN ALGERIAN
EDUCATION POLICIES AND DEFINING THE ALGERIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

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THESIS PROSPECTUS

« Je sentais qu'il était nécessaire de parler français mieux que les Français, pour les convaincre, justement, que nous n'étions pas français. Il fallait écrire un livre dans une langue telle que les Français soient réellement ébranlés, jusqu'à se dire : « Ça, c'est l'Algérie! »¹

- Kateb Yacine

INTRODUCTION

June 29 1992, Annaba, Algeria. The scene has been set. Events have already been set into motion. Mohamed Boudiaf, the then-Algerian president, is seated comfortably at the center of an elevated stage, addressing the nation in a televised speech.² There is a palpable tension in the room, a kind of hidden, suppressed electricity furiously charging through the atmospheric circuit of the air, anxiously waiting for a spark to trigger its release. The camera is rolling, projecting the determined visage of the Algerian president, brimming with confidence and conviction, onto television screens across the country. In the middle of his speech and unwittingly foreshadowing events to come, he booms in rapid-fire Algerian Arabic:

“The human being possesses a short life - we may very well all die tomorrow. So if a person is qualified, we must ensure that there are several conditions determining access to (work) responsibilities, among which are competence, honesty, and excellence in work ethic. We see all these nations that have surpassed us! Through what? Through knowledge!”

The audience, composed of solemn-looking Algerian men, listens with rapt attention, with nary a person daring to budge in his seat. Boudiaf is talking about the need for Algeria to rethink its economic policies.

¹ At that time I felt it necessary to speak French even better than the French themselves, to convince them that we were not French. We must write our books in such a way that the French will be so shaken as to say to themselves: This – This is Algeria!”

² Boudiaf was addressing a public meeting in the eastern Algerian city of Annaba.

Suddenly, the sound of a grenade explosion reverberates in the room. Boudiaf hesitates and looks to his left. An uninterrupted, rapid stream of gunfire soon follows, causing smoke to fill the room. The camera swivels frantically left to right, futilely attempting to locate the source of the unexpected commotion. Chaos reigns and people dive for cover behind their seats to avoid getting caught in the line of indiscriminate firing. The cloud of smoke, as transient as the gunfire that preceded it, clears a few moments after. A horrible, billowing silence overwhelms the room. The immobile body of the Algerian president lays on the ground, bloodied and riddled with bullets.

The assassination of Boudiaf, caught on tape, was emblematic of Algeria's national identity crisis. Boudiaf's assassin was, in an ironic turn of events, the former president's own bodyguard and self-professed Islamist sympathizer of *Le Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS).³ The Algerian civil war that intensified after Boudiaf's assassination was waged between Islamist guerilla groups pushing for an increased Arabization and Islamization of the country and the military-backed government wanting to preserve the status quo. The war was essentially an ideological crisis, with both sides fighting to impose its own vision of an Algerian national identity, whether through a religious, Arabization model or through a secular, Francophone mold.

DEFINING NATIONAL IDENTITY

It is first necessary to define the concept of "national identity." In "*National Identity*," Anthony Smith defines it as possessing several fundamental characteristics, among which are "a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common

³ *Le Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), or the Islamic Salvation Front, was one of the various Islamist guerilla groups fighting to overthrow the military-backed Algerian government during the start of the bloody Algerian civil war that endured throughout the 1990s.

economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.”⁴ Smith also characterizes national identity as “fundamentally multi-dimensional” and “complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components.”⁵ Smith’s constructivist theory proposes that national identity, the process of self-identifying with a nation based on personal experiences and pre-conceived notions of belonging, is as much a synthetic, imagined social construct as it is varied and abstract.

This constructivist theory postulating that national identity is essentially an invented socio-political reality has been set forth numerous times before. Eric Hobsbawm describes traditions and identity in his seminal work, *“The Invention of Tradition,”* as a set of fabricated norms and values imposed through ritualization and repetition established to complement a constructed historical narrative.⁶ Likewise, Benedict Anderson proposes in *“Imagined Communities”* that national identity and nation are “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁷ Anderson is postulating that constituent members will likely never have the opportunity to meet most of their other comrades due to the demographic immensity of any given population; however, the assumption of the existence of an imagined camaraderie or common fellowship is sufficient to ensure the durability of any fabricated national identity.⁸

French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas in *“L’Altérité et Transcendance”* introduces the concept of alterity in identity formation. According to Lévinas, alterity is the process of “othering” or constructing boundary markers to separate the self from the “other” or non-self.⁹

⁴ Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press) 14

⁵ Smith, *National Identity* 15

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 4

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso) 6

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *L’Altérité et Transcendance* (New York: Columbia University Press)

With regards to national identity, alterity determines the denominational boundary markers, such as language, that distinguish a particular national identity from another, promoting identity exclusivity.

Alterity, imagined political community, and invented traditions are henceforth building blocks crucial to the historical innovation of national symbols, memories, even notions of a shared language, to construct a fluid, albeit superficial, narrative of a national identity. Thomas Hylland Eriksen in “*Ethnicity and Nationalism*” proposes that the historical construction of any national narrative is not a product of the past but instead a response to requirements of the present, which signifies the fluidity and elasticity of national identity.¹⁰ The state is thus able to invent and impose its own reconstructive, selective version of history to formulate national identity for purposes of national unity, depending on present circumstances.

If national identity is a multi-dimensional, invented construct malleable to requirements of the present, then it can be created, negotiated, imposed, removed, and re-negotiated depending on prevailing circumstances. Henry Kissinger defines negotiation as “a process of combining conflicting positions into a common position, under a decision rule of unanimity, a phenomenon in which the outcome is determined by the process.”¹¹ Using this definition, the process of constructing a common national identity thus requires a continuous process of negotiation, constituting the following steps: 1) the process of alterity requiring the drawing of specific identity boundary markers to a distinct national identity, 2) the process of imagining a political community based on a shared historical narrative, and 3) the process of inventing traditions reinforcing the sense of a national identity.

¹⁰ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press) 72

¹¹ Henry Kissinger, “The Viet Nam Negotiations” *Foreign Affairs* 47

ARABIC AND FRENCH WITHIN THE ALGERIAN CONTEXT

If the Algerian national identity is treated as a potential point of conflict that requires the constant process of negotiation, then the assassination of Boudiaf is symptomatic of that ongoing process. The civil war was in fact the process of alterity manifesting in a violent manner, with both sides fighting to establish their own boundary markers to create a distinct national identity.

Within the concept of national identity, language is also a fundamental boundary marker. In Algeria, the Arabic language and the French language are the two most commonly spoken languages, but they share a contentious relationship in relation to national identity. The Arabic language, in the form of Classical/Literary Arabic or dialectal Algerian Arabic, evokes an Algerian national identity as a Arabo-Islamic socio-political construct based on Islamic and Arabic traditions. The French language, on the other hand, imagines an Algerian national identity as a secular, Francophone socio-political construct that may also be inadvertently associated with the socio-historical trauma of French colonization and the dispossession of Algeria's existing indigenous languages. Arabic and French in Algeria have thus often been a "us-versus-them" categorizer - powerful boundary markers and expedient political tools that enforce identity exclusivity and evoke differing images of national identity.

Since Algeria's independence in 1962, Algerian intellectuals, writers, and politicians have expressed a plethora of views arguing for the future of Arabic and French in Algerian society. Assia Djebar, a prominent Algerian novelist renowned for her work in Algerian feminist literature written in the French language, is a proponent of a strong Arabic-French bilingual policy. Djebar advocates preserving both Arabic and French as important boundary markers to define Algerian identity. In a speech given at the *L'Académie Française* on June 22 2006, Djebar declares herself an Algerian who has internalized French in such a manner that the stigma of

French as the language of the colonizer no longer exists, as French is a natural part of her as Arabic:¹²

La langue française, la vôtre, Mesdames et Messieurs, devenue la mienne, tout au moins en écriture, le français donc est lieu de creusement de mon travail, espace de ma méditation ou de ma rêverie, cible de mon utopie peut-être, je dirai même; tempo de ma respiration, au jour le jour: ce que je voudrais esquisser, en cet instant où je demeure silhouette dressée sur votre seuil...¹³

The French language, which is yours, ladies and gentlemen, has become mine, at least in writing, French has thusly become the place of the deepening of my work, the space of my meditation or of my daydreams, the target of my utopia perhaps, I will even say it is the tempo of my breathing, from day to day: (it is) what I would like to sketch at this instant, where I dwell as a silhouette standing upright at your doorstep...

In her speech, Djebbar acknowledges the trauma of French colonization on the Algerian population, where the French language was imposed to the detriment of Algeria's other existing languages such as Arabic and Tamazight.¹⁴ She also fully embraces French, dissociating it from its colonial origins and accepting it as a language that is authentically Algerian and as much a carrier and preserver of the Algerian identity and culture as Arabic.¹⁵

RESEARCH QUESTION

In my research, I will be working within the theoretical framework of language as an identity boundary marker in national identity creation, making the assumption that the Arabic language and the French language may help shape perceptions of an Algerian national identity. Since

¹² Djebbar was elected to the *L'Académie Française* (the French Academy) in 2005, a prestigious, influential body specializing in pedagogical matters of the French language. The speech was given a year later in a reception held in her honor to recognize her election to the institution.

¹³ Assia Djebbar, *Discours du réception: Réception de Madame Assia Djebbar*. Paris, Palais de l'Institut. 22 June 2006. Retrieved from: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/discours-de-reception-et-reponse-de-pierre-jean-remy>

¹⁴ Tamazight is the umbrella term to refer to a group of Berber languages indigenous to the North African region. While Tamazight has been officially recognized by the Algerian government in 2002 as a "national language", the issue of Berber nationalism and linguistic Tamazight nationalism remains contentious and controversial.

¹⁵ Assia Djebbar, *Discours du réception: Réception de Madame Assia Djebbar*. Paris, Palais de l'Institut. 22 June 2006. Retrieved from: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/discours-de-reception-et-reponse-de-pierre-jean-remy>

language policies are often communicated in schools, my research will also focus specifically on educational policies in Algerian schools and how Arabic and French are each represented within the structural framework of the Algerian education system, from primary education up until tertiary education. My research explores the question: *Has Algeria's bilingual Arabic-French language policies in its schools, from its independence to the present day, shaped and influenced the Algerian sense of national identity, and if so, how?*

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter examines the historical development of Algerian language policies in Arabic and French, organized along three key points: the socio-historical background of Arabic and French in contemporary Algerian society, the structural components of the Algerian education system, and how language policies are driven, formulated and implemented by Algerian administrations across three successive historical eras.

The second chapter addresses three key theoretical concepts pertinent to the understanding of national identity: What is national identity? What is the role of language in shaping national identity? What are the social constructs and influencing factors that contribute to an individual's formulation of national identity? In exploring these theoretical concepts, the second chapter will proceed to answer the following questions: What are the components that make up the Algerian identity? How did successive Algerian administrations utilize its own constructed vision of an Algerian national identity in formulating language policies in schools?

The third chapter merges the historical framework and theoretical analysis of the first two chapters to address the stated research question. A research study comprising of survey questions and interviews with Algerians in Algiers, Algeria, to be conducted on-location in December 2014-January 2015, will serve as the data bank to analyze the connection between language and

the Algerian national identity. Survey questions will encompass issues of national identity, language preferences, and opinions on the role of Arabic and French in Algerian society. Surveys and interviews will be available and conducted in either Arabic or French, depending on the preference of the interviewee. The goal of the thesis is to determine through statistical data and discursive analysis whether or not language, manifested as Arabic and French in official educational policies, shapes Algerian national identity.