THE MOOR: A NEIGHBOUR UNDER SUSPICION.
MAINTENANCE OF COLONIAL AMBIGUOUS STEREOTYPES
IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN SPAIN AND MOROCCO

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Què deu pensar en Samir dalt del minaret de Tânger,
el peus damunt la misèria i els ulls somiant Espanya,
despullarà el seu cos tan bell i el llençarà a les aigües.
Déus facin que amb la força d’enyors i de nostàlgies
pugui ormejar una barca...
Un pont de mar blava per sentir-nos frec a frec,
un pont que agermani pells i vides diferents,
diferents.
   Lluís Llach

The academic context for reviewing the stereotypes

The use of the term “postcolonial” began only a very few years ago, but its success and the expansion of its use have been surprising. Its definition is not easy in that it is an ambiguous and very controversial concept. In 1991 Homi K. Bhabha, one of its promoters, defined it as a concept that

   “is increasingly used to refer to the form of social criticism that unravels the unfair processes of representation with which the historical experience of the previously colonised Third World comes to be conceptualised in the West.” (quoted by Monguia, 1996: p. 1)

That is to say, it is an attempt to “decolonise the mind” (Thiong’o, 1986) and therefore contains a strong critique of ethnocentrism and eurocentrism.

Edward W. Said’s Orientalism, published in 1978, can be considered a key work in this process. In essence, what Said suggested (inspired by Foucault and Gramsci) is that the “Orient” does not really exist except as a European construction. It is a “western” intellectual product, an image of the “Other” which allows, by defining this “Other”, the identification of oneself as European, as Western. According to Said, it is food for thought that there is no such equivalent and parallel field of studies called “Occidentalism”. For Said, orientalism cannot be reduced to an extensive collection of texts about the Orient, but is considerably more:

   “It is rather a distribution of geopolitical consciousness in texts of an aesthetic, scientific, economic, sociological, historical and philological character; it is the drawing up not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is formed by two unequal halves, East and West) but of a whole series of ‘interests’ which it not only creates, but also maintains, by
means of scientific discoveries, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, descriptions of landscape and the like; it is, more than not expressing a degree of will or intention to understand, in some cases controlling, manipulating and even incorporating what is a manifestly different (or alternative or new) world.” (Said, 1991: pp. 24-25)

In Spain the historian Josep Fontana (1994) hit on the same idea:

“To build the concept of the European in the light of the diversity of peoples and cultures, we ‘invent’ the Asians, Africans and Americans, attributing to them a collective identity which they do not have. [...] Quite the most subtle of these inventions has been that of Asia, which went from being a mere geographical concept to become a historical and cultural entity, the ‘Orient’, which allows us to solve the problem of locating on our linear diagram societies with an advanced culture that we cannot cast into prehistory, like those of Africa, America and Oceania.” (pp. 127-128)

For Fontana, this “invention” of the Orient did not only serve to define the superiority of the West within a linear conception of historical progress. It was also the fruit of another basic impulse of Romanticism, the flight from a West where industrialisation was the basis of economic strength and military might, but also a sordid reality. This escapism propelled an all-star cast of male and female travellers towards oriental lands, above all the Islamic Orient, but

“the Orient they were looking for was a European invention: a refuge from the materialistic ugliness of the industrial West that they had created themselves in their dreams, adorning it with everything they were missing in their own surroundings…What there actually was or what was happening in these lands mattered little to them.” (Fontana, 1994: p. 130)

Orientalism is, therefore, an influential academic tradition, but also

“an area of interest defined by travellers, commercial enterprises, governments, military expeditions, readers of novels and of exotic adventure stories, natural historians and pilgrims for whom the Orient is a specific type of knowledge about specific places, peoples and civilisations.” (Said, 1991: p. 207)

Spain in Morocco: a colonial discourse and an imperialist rhetoric

At the end of the 19th century, Spain threw itself into an African colonial adventure, achieving, in contrast to the French and the British, a tiny, not to say miserable, portion of the great territorial cake being shared out at the time. The occupation of the other side of the Strait of Gibraltar was justified with arguments of a historical or cultural nature claiming superiority of civilisation, thereby exteriorising problems publicised by the “Disaster of 1898” that had a strictly internal origin, based on obvious political ineptitude and clear military incapacity.

Also in this context arguments were raised that occupation, based on the Spanish colonising tradition and on the supposed “civilising vocation” and imperialist projection of the European
states (to which Spain was trying to compare itself), would create a favourable atmosphere for economic growth in the country. The simplistic and mistaken reasoning presented by the political class and the African lobbies was that Spanish progress (recovery after the “disaster”) would come as a consequence of colonial expansion when, in fact, colonialism follows an inverse process: imperial-colonial expansion is always the product of the previous existence of economic and political stability in the metropolitan territory.

It is clear, therefore, that it is difficult to compare the Orientalism existing at the end of the 19th century in cities like London or Paris with that which can be imagined in Barcelona or in Madrid, either in erudite studies, literature, painting or in other arts. Spanish orientalism is not only much weaker in quantitative terms, but it is also specifically African and, more precisely, Moroccan: Spain’s “orient” turns out to be in the south. The Spanish Orient is, in fact, Morocco, at least from the second half of the 19th century onwards, and this is due to several factors: the geographical proximity of the North African coast, the cultural heritage of Al-Andalus and the new colonial era Spain was beginning in this region.

How stereotypes are built: an ambiguous look charged with suspicion

To strengthen their interests in the colonisation project, the different groups with “Africanist” aims managed to build and popularise a pro-colonial dialogue. This dialogue was formed of initiatives which included the creation of societies and bodies that openly contributed to exercising the type of pressure that all lobbies do; the organisation of expeditions aimed at ensuring control of the territories through extensive and systematic knowledge of them, and the dissemination of this knowledge through conferences and courses and by the publication of travel books, regional monographs, didactic manuals, maps and so on.

It is in this context that a “scientific” Africanism appears in which colonial arguments of both a military and commercial nature find support and which covers Moroccan studies in most fields: from geography, geology and botany to history, ethnography, the Arabic language and Islamic law. It is an Africanism that gains greater impetus after the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, with the creation of the Institute of African Studies (Instituto de Estudios Africanos), which represents its full integration into the Francoist ideological system (Bosch, 1985). This does not exclude the existence in Spain of some tradition of Arab studies dating from the Renaissance, given the Moslem presence in Spain for so many centuries (a tradition, however, which is very weak if we take into account the weight of and the mark left by the hispano-Moslem civilisation) (López García, 1990).

Undoubtedly education and, within it, educational programmes and textbooks, formed a basic instrument for creating and transmitting a certain image of the Moroccan “Other” in the eyes of Spaniards and, also, a key element in the process of controlling the native population on the part of the “protecting” power.

The regional monographs and the student textbooks clearly pursued two aims: to spread geographical knowledge of the Protectorate among Spaniards and to convince them, in turn, of the opportunity for and expediency of a foreign policy ensuring Spain’s presence in North Africa.
A colonial North African policy was clearly backed as apparently the only way to return to a place in the concert of great nations.

An artistic and literary body of work of a clearly Orientalist character linked to North African lands and culture also appears. Painters, artists, engravers and, later, photographers and filmmakers managed to establish something of a “Moroccan school”. Their graphic production embodies an ideologised vision of Morocco, created from fantasy and arrogance and based on a mixture of ignorance and hostile stereotypes.

The Spanish literature of the time on a Moroccan theme is not homogenous: besides works by the heirs of Modernism rejoicing in the exotic, picturesque and colourful country at once nearby and faraway, can be found others set in the periods of warlike confrontation (from the battles between Christians and Moslems in the Middle Ages to the constant confrontations between Spaniards and Moroccans throughout the 16th to the 19th centuries); many of them exuding violence, pain and death.

Travel books assume a direct approach to the Moroccan reality through direct and personal discovery. The traveller, by putting his experiences down on paper, makes the reader participate as the witness to a discovery in a journey as much personal as geographical. That is its attraction for the potential audience of the time, which is always going to be wider than that of the specialised circles of readers to whom reports, historical texts, compilations of maps and so on are directed. Therefore the travel story, together with the journalistic chronicle, is the privileged means for penetrating public opinion and so for creating the image of the “Other” (Marín, 1996: p. 106).

Morocco in the Spanish imagery

Both before and during the Franco’s dictatorship, certain stereotypes were insistently repeated, stereotypes that most students of the subject, among them Litvak (1990) and Marín (1992), have also found in their respective analyses. In this way, among other stereotypes, biased (usually ambiguous and at times contradictory) images were established about:

- Moslem architecture (with repeated reminders of Moorish Granada and, especially of the Alhambra, as a reference to a common Andalusian past);
- water (because of its scarcity or for the development of hydraulic engineering);
- the desert (probably the most memorable setting with which are related the colours –yellow, red and black– and flaming passions –the sun, heat, fire-. The desert is infinite, uncontrollable, the kingdom of desires, ghosts and dreams);
- souks and bazaars (which, with their mixtures of merchants and merchandise always evoke disorder, confusion and chaos in the eyes of a Westerner);
- jewels and treasures, gold and silver, the contrast between luxury and poverty;
- Moslems (generally considered barbarians and fanatics, but also the heirs to ancient virtues of military honour, individual bravery and disdain for death; the tyranny and despotism of their forms of government are pointed out as if this had not also been something usual in Spanish history);
- the Moslem woman (a strange mixture of eroticism and mystery; the harem awakens enormous curiosity, fascination, imagination and attraction and is seen as one of the most private, prohibited and inaccessible areas of the Moslem world);
- the contrast in attitudes to life (the great patience and hospitality of the Moroccans are pointed out in the framework of a sense of time completely different from the European one; together with this there is marked cruelty: blood, war, death, mutilation, corporal punishment and physical suffering are always present);
- hypocrisy, superstition, (supposed) ignorance and lack of culture, fate as controller of the destiny of people; fanaticism, male superiority and obscurantism in religion (all this as the origin and consequence of social backwardness and economic underdevelopment, ignoring similar processes and attitudes in recent Spanish history);
- a world guided by the senses, now lost in Europe (from hidden feminine sensuality to the magic of the snake charmer; “exoticism, largely based on the senses converted into the firmest resources of aestheticism, means the perception of a colour, a sound, the softness of a cloth or a smell, awakens a long series of emotions and connections” (Litvak, 1990: p. 87);
- the “Moor” is dirty, a traitor and a quarrelsome thief (the Spaniard, confronted with these characteristics, must be wary and remain alert, but with a firm belief in the superiority of the white Western race, Spanish culture and the highest, purest and most genuine conventions of the Catholic religion, justifying the required paternalistic attitude towards the inferior people who must be protected, educated and corrected);
- the Moroccans’ way of being, of doing things and of thinking is usually presented as the antithesis of the Spanish, despite the fact that there are quite insistent and very noisy allusions to the distant historical common ties and geographical similarities between Andalusia and the north of Morocco. The Moroccans are seen “as the embodiment of everything contrasting with Spaniards. Thus, as in a mirror, reality is inverted” (Marín, 1992: pp. 148-149). A perfect example of “Orientalism”, of the construction of “otherness”.

The permanence of stereotypes promotes suspicious views

At times of change and crisis, and without serious, sincere or deep knowledge of mutual reality, Spaniards, as in the useful example of what is currently happening on the northern side of the Mediterranean, turn to durable stereotypes to justify actions and attitudes. Effectively, with a lack of better information and, above all, as an excellent instrument for manipulating and creating public opinion, the set of stereotypes created and transmitted over the decades by supposedly scientific texts, by biased geopolitical dialogue, by controlled pictorial images and by superficial and inconsistent travel books is called upon.

In this way, travel agencies use the clichés of exoticism, of the desert, of the labyrinthine souk or of Arab sensuality to “sell” the Orient as the tourist product nearest to the Iberian peninsula. Spanish companies use the euphemism of aiding local development to revive colonialism and imperialism, setting themselves up in Morocco looking for lower prices and costs with minimum investment and maximum exploitation of the environment and of the workers, with most of the profits coming back to Spain. While the official line of the Spanish State is that “we are bound to
Morocco with secular ties of good friendship, brotherhood and good neighbourliness”, lack of confidence on the southern flank continues to mark military strategy; preferential commercial agreements are used to avoid direct confrontation over thorny subjects like the Western Sahara, Ceuta and Melilla, human rights and so on.

Although foreign immigration in Spain is a quite recent phenomenon and its figures are still relatively non-significant when we compare them to the global magnitude of the European Union (less than 5% of the Spanish total population), Spanish society perceives immigration as a truly conflictive social problem. As a matter of fact, there have been some examples of racial riots in rural areas (such as the ones in El Ejido in Andalusia) or in suburban areas (like in Terrassa in Catalonia). These events have affected specially the Moroccan that is the most important group in total numbers of immigrants.

The hypocrisy of many Spanish people is also shown on their different perceptions following the economic status of the immigrants, wherever they come from Morocco or from Saudi Arabia. The rich immigrant settled in Marbella or other exclusive tourist resorts of the Mediterranean seaside is called “arab” and is considered with curiosity, respect and admiration. Although arriving with an excellent university degree, the poor immigrant is always called “Moor” and is condemned to a marginalised destiny.

Spanish citizens make use of the most antiquated and pejorative stereotypes to refer to “Moors” who, after the trauma of leaving their home and family, after surviving the mafias and the waves crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in a fragile boat and after managing to get a more than precarious and poorly paid marginal job, move into the same street in which the Spaniard lives. The stigma of these stereotypes adds difficulty to the already hard enough process of social and economic integration (aggravated by the frequent lack of “papers” which make the Moroccans’ very presence in Spain illegal), even in comparison with immigrants from other countries.

It is also significant that other muslim immigrants (like the pakistanis) have an ambiguous image: although they keep the stigma of their skin and religion and they are often confused with arabs, there are no special bad stereotypes on them (they are considered good workers, clean people aiming order and strong community ties, etc.). This may be due to the fact that the lack of historical relations between Pakistan and Spain has avoided the construction of pejorative labels that, nowadays, characterises the moroccans.

In relation to this, in a recent book Juan Goytisolo and Sami Naïr (2000) notice that:

“"The immigrants from Latin America do not arise much surprise; they do speak Spanish, they have the same religion, and they get adapted to the Spanish habits. For the people from the Magreb and from Africa this situation is quite different. They do not share the same language or the faith. Moreover, we should add to these the geographic proximity to their country (the Magreb) and the historic adversity (the expelled Islam from Spain in 1492). [...] These two last factors are nevertheless secondary. [...] They light again identity conflicts of the remote past of the Iberian peninsula. The rhetoric of the ‘breaking wave’ of immigration from the South, so prevalent nowadays in the media and the supposedly
‘innocent’ discourses of reputed politicians; does not it reuse the same cultural categories of the anti-Muslim substrate? Is not the anti-Moroccan attitude another form of the rooted imaginary of the Reconquest of the Peninsula from the moors? The useful obedience of the Moroccan workers to the ‘nouveau riche’ of Andalusia or Terrassa, does not come from the same legacy from the collective unconsciousness, of the submission of the moor?” (pp. 135-136)

These thesis are also shared by Pajares (1999) when he affirms that

“the process of racialization of the Moroccan group is built upon multiple factors. And among those, they have a particular importance a long history of conflicts and specially the eight centuries of the Reconquest, or in other words, of fighting against the Muslims invaders, and also a long and tragic colonial in Morocco in the twentieth century.” (p. 141)

The same author also adds that during the last decade:

“the Western identification between Muslims and integrism also promotes and contributes to stigmatise the Moroccan immigrant. Islam is presented as the most opposed civilisation in relation to the Western world. [...] These elements are present in the media and therefore they have clear effects in our vision of the people from the Magreb. The Gulf War should be mentioned in this sense, because it stressed the ubiquitous stigmatisation of all people from Arabic origin, by making them suspicious and identifying them as the enemy”.

(Pajares, 1999: p. 142)

The events of September 11th, 2001, have intensified this view of the moor as a suspicious person.

Therefore, the double and ambiguous dialogue created throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and based on mutual ignorance, false perceptions and manipulations, remains alive a the beginning of the 21st century: the “good brother from the South” is also a neighbour whose dark skin makes him suspet. Traditional clichés charged with paternalism and sexism; cultural, social and religious prejudices and open contempt are used as excellent criminalizing arguments to incite unfounded fears or, much worse, the outbreaks of racism and xenophobia that have been appearing in Spain, until now only scarcely.

As Pajares (1999) points out,

“the intercultural dialog with the immigrant Moroccan population might be more difficult, but it is nevertheless, more important than with any other group of the population, because it will be the key factor in the success or failure of the processes of integration.” (p. 142)

Rethinking views and images: the richness of the zones of contact

Orientalism and post colonialism contribute decisively to the thematic renewal of colonial studies, requiring the reconsideration of the very concept of colonial space, understood from now on not just as the land outside Europe occupied by the empires of the First World, but as a “contact zone” wherever it might be and, therefore as a set of
“social spaces where very different cultures meet, collide and fight against each other, usually in the framework of extremely asymmetrical relationships of dominance and subordination.” (Pratt, 1992: p. 4)

which converts them into enormously attractive spaces, as areas for study, although they are full of challenges. It is clear that there are many other contact zones, but the cultural contact space is, without doubt, one of the most significant, given that in it people who are geographically and historically very distant enter into relationships with generally unequal links. Moreover, the concept of a “contact zone” is interesting because it touches on the idea of co-presence, interaction and meshing and not on that of separation, however asymmetrical the power relationships might be.

The phenomenon of transculturation exists throughout the contact zone. It is a concept which allows us to go beyond the way in which subordinate or marginal groups choose and absorb the dominant culture. While it is true that subordinate cultures cannot control what comes out of the dominant culture, they can determine up to a certain point what they absorb from it and how they use it. Therefore we have to talk about reception and appropriation on the periphery of the metropolitan forms of representation, but also (and this is rarely mentioned) about transculturation from the colonies to the metropolis. Could not the European image of the Other actually be influenced by the Other itself? Every imperial metropolis tends to see itself as determining the periphery, but it is rarely conscious of the point to which it is determined by the periphery, beginning with the subject of representation. In a way, as Said put it:

"I believe there exists, in all cultures which define themselves nationally, an aspiration towards sovereignty, absorption and domination. French, British, Indian and Japanese cultures coincide in this aspect. Paradoxically, at the same time, we have never been so conscious of how strangely hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how much the majority of often contradictory experiences and fields have in common, of how they cross national frontiers, defying the policing action of pure dogma and crude patriotism. In reality, far from building unitary, autonomous and monolithic entities, cultures adopt more ‘foreign elements’, more othernesses and differences than those which they consciously exclude. Who, in India or in Algeria, can separate with certainty components of the British or French past from current reality, or who, in England or in France, can draw a circle around English London or French Paris that excludes the effect of India or Algeria on these two imperial cities?” (Said, 1996: pp. 51-52)

As Spanish sovereignty in Morocco reached its end, a Spanish teacher with roots in Tetuán proposed (in an unusually open-minded exercise) that Spanish schools should be receptive to the surrounding reality:

“Children go to school, where they might find Moroccan classmates, they play in the street with their neighbours and from them learn words and phrases in the language of the country; on occasions they see scenes and images of customs that they do not understand or know how to interpret and their natural curiosity brings them to ask about them. These
children are part of two different atmospheres, they are witnesses to two ways of life [...] From the above it is clear that Spanish schools in Morocco cannot be the same as Spanish schools in Spain, nor can Spanish children here be educated like Spanish children in the peninsula.” (Valderrama, 1956: pp. 254-255)

Travelling, being an active part of different surroundings, being witnesses to different ways of life, positively “contaminating oneself” with the reality of the “other”: these are some of the antidotes to the falsehood and manipulation that the stereotypes bring, overcoming the attitude of suspicion and learning to value the richness of diversity.
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