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Printed Matter(s): Critical Histories and Perspectives on Tunisian Cultural Journals

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In a 1974 interview with *Nouvelles littéraires*, Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī (1911-2004), who served as Minister of Cultural Affairs between 1973 and 1976, addressed the cultural challenges and opportunities that availed themselves to a newly independent Tunisia. A public intellectual, professor, novelist, playwright, and literary critic, as well as policy maker, al-Mas'adī outlined a vision of "cultural development" at once rooted in a diachronic understanding of national culture and identity, and propelled by a critical desire to innovate:

> Cultural development must be regarded both as a factor of national identity—or cultural identity—and as an instrument of transformation or change of a society. . . . [D]evelopment and modernization must be pursued under the triple banner of (i) fidelity to oneself, (ii) the profound will to renew, and (iii) the wise and rational selection of borrowings and influences to integrate into the modernization process. (qtd. in Kacem 40 and transl. in Davis 2)

Al-Mas'adī's tripartite approach to cultural modernity encompassed adherence to a cohesive—albeit heterogeneous—sense of national identity, the drive for renewal, and the selective adaptation of a diverse range of materials, influences, and ideas. He thus demonstrates the investment of the Tunisian intelligentsia in theorizing and cultivating cultural capital that would move beyond the binary of "cultural authenticity" and "colonial mimicry" that then dominated intellectual debates staged across the decolonizing world. This is a binary, I would add, that continues to haunt, in subtle ways, the theorization of the postcolonial world. As the Editor in Chief (1944-1947) of the literary journal *al-Mabāḥith* (Investigations), as well as a frequent contributor to the journal *al-Fikr* (Contemplation), al-Mas'adī represents a generation of Maghrebi intellectuals whose vision of cultural innovation encompassed a variety of critical traditions and genres. These included: philosophical treatises, political tracts, policy proposals, manifestos, editorials, non-fictional prose, literary and cultural criticism, theater, short stories, novellas, poetry, and visual art. Moreover, these intellectuals espoused diverse ideological perspectives, writing from the vantage points of Humanism, Islamic Reformism, Marxism-Leninism, Commitment (*iltizām*) and Existentialism, among others.

This article examines the cultural and material histories of Tunisian periodicals, while framing them within the broader intellectual movements that shaped print culture across the Maghreb. I argue that Tunisian cultural journals of the mid-twentieth century complicate teleological or binary narratives of decolonization, nationalism, acculturation, and literary modernity within cultural histories of the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to serializing and publishing fiction and criticism, Maghrebi periodicals—such as *Āfāq* (Horizons), *al-'Alam al-Adabī* (The Literary World), *al-Fikr*, *al-Mabāḥith*, *Confluent* (Confluence), *Novembre: Revue culturelle algérienne* (November: An Algerian Cultural Journal) and *Souffles-Anfas* (Breaths)—also appealed to nationalist and supranationalist ideologies, such as Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Islamism, Maghrebi unity, Humanism, Global Marxism, and Third-Worldism. Their history contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that disrupts Orientalist accounts of the flow of cultural and scientific knowledge from the imperial centers of Western Europe, to their colonial outposts across Asia and Africa. Maghrebi cultural journals reveal the transnational networks that emerged across the region during this period. Their global financing, publication, circulation, and readership expose circuits spanning North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean basin, and Europe; not to mention internationalist alliances with colonized and stateless populations. These rhizomatic flows of cultural capital thus signal subversive geopolitical exchanges operating outside the dominant logics of colonial mediation. More crucially, the diversity of these publications and their editorial practices reflect an ideologically polyphonic archive of materials critically relevant to the "vexed archives of decolonization," to borrow Omnia El Shakry's apt turn of phrase. She asks:

> what if we thought of decolonization as an ongoing process and series of struggles rather than a finite event, as regional as well as national, intellectual and cultural as well as political, and religious as well as secular? We might then shift our attention away from dominant and declensionist narratives of decolonization as a state-driven and secular political process, to include members of the intelligentsia, social scientists, and religious thinkers who were bypassed in or excised from traditional archives. How then might we reimagine the archives of decolonization? (El Shakry 925)

In the spirit of opening up the archives of decolonization, this article begins by exploring the various critical approaches to, and accounts of, print culture in the region. It then looks beyond the Maghreb as a geopolitical space, to consider how recent scholarship on the avant-garde and literary modernity, alongside the growing field of Periodical Studies, both contribute to and are complicated by this archive. I focus on three pivotal Arabic cultural journals published in Tunisia: *al-'Alam al-Adabī* (1930-1936), *al-Mabāḥith* (1938-1947), and *al-Fikr* (1955-1986). My reading of the ideological and formal divergences within and between these periodicals is contextualized within the unique history of Tunisian state institutions and figures. Finally, I examine a sample issue from *al-Fikr*, framing it within the journal's broader intellectual and political projects. I argue that the issue—published in June 1956 on the coattails of Tunisian independence—offers a productive lens for examining the cultural journal as a literary form, and the ideological as well as structural possibilities, or limitations, afforded by it.

Print Culture and Decolonization

Alongside the recent growth of Periodical Studies within Euro-American-dominated Modernist Studies, there has been an increased interest in periodicals as barometers of political, literary, and cultural trends across the Middle East and North Africa.[1] This article bridges these parallel tracks, in order to argue that the cultural archives of the Maghreb should be seen as critically relevant to these fields. Tunisian periodicals, as well as the debates staged within them, not only broaden Periodical, Modernist, and Avant-Garde Studies beyond their Euro-American origins, but can further shape their theoretical insights.

Within the relatively small body of regional work on periodicals, some scholars have documented—in an almost encyclopedic fashion—the emergence and evolution of early print periodicals (see Souriau-Hoebrechts and Achouar). Their reliance on the distinct historical categories of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial, however, can lead to the perception of a linear periodization of literary modernity. A number of scholars zoom in on a particular journal—such as *Souffles-Anfas*, which has recently received much deserved critical attention in both French and US critical circles (see Sefrioui and Harrison and Villa-Ignacio). Some highlight canonical intellectuals who played a pivotal role in the history of cultural journals—particularly al-Mas‘adī, ‘Alī al-Du‘ajī and ‘Abdellatif Laâbi (see Mamelouk, Omri, and Babana-Hampton). Others still tackle the history of periodicals within a specific country, as well as along a particular topos or theme—generally Morocco in the Maghrebi context (see Ellis, Parrilla, and Vogl).

The scholarly inclination towards Morocco within Maghrebi Studies is particularly relevant to the discussion of regional print culture, and its relationship to ideologies and institutions—both historical and current. Scholars have drawn convincing connections to the country's popularity as a (neo)colonial, Orientalist, or "cosmopolitan" outpost for Americans and Europeans across the twentieth century (see Edwards); or, they have highlighted the neo-colonial networks of publication and circulation between Morocco and France (see MacDonald). The material conditions (security clearances, travel restrictions, state funds for cultural preservation initiatives or institutions, the material destruction of archives, as well as the mysterious disappearance of politically incendiary materials) also render certain archives—Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, for example—less accessible to international scholars, particularly after recent social and political upheavals across the region.[2] And these are realities that will likely continue to worsen, provoking very serious questions about the relationship between "both material and ideational iterations" of archives, and the intellectual histories, canons, and reading practices that they reify (El Shakry 934). More recent attempts to digitize these materials have largely been driven by either private universities or national libraries, but overall pale in comparison to the fervor with which US and European academic institutions have embraced the Digital Humanities as both a conceptual and methodological framework for thinking through the archive in the neo-liberal age.[3] The journals I analyze in this article, for example, were all physical copies either purchased through private collectors or scanned from the collections of local libraries and archives. It is worth noting that the absence of digitization, coupled with the sheer volume of primary materials, has direct implications on the methodologies and subsequent reading practices that can be brought to this source material.

While existing scholarship on Maghrebi periodicals offers an invaluable resource for understanding the histories that have shaped the development of print culture in the Maghreb, I want to highlight the relationship between the journal as a form and these aforementioned histories. There is a tendency to read the period of decolonization as marked by the proliferation of religious and ethnic nationalist or supranationalist ideologies (Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, and Pan-Islamism). Such movements are often read in diametric opposition to anti-statist, leftist, and "secular" internationalist movements that sought to link decolonizing populations in their struggles for autonomy and self-determination. While the pages of many of these journals do in fact claim solidarities and allegiances with populations across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, I argue that these function dialogically with other cultural, social, and political projects that might otherwise be framed as provincially ethno-nationalist or religious—not to mention the entire range in between (see Harrison, “Cross-Colonial” 357). The dialectical relationship between these various spheres, I propose, provides a fascinating lens through which to consider the cultural (literary, philosophical, critical) journal as a form. In other words, in reconciling the multiplicity of ideological perspectives, styles, genres, and voices that collectively construct a journal, what can we glean about the formal imbrication of the cultural journal and culture-qua-culture?

Despite the structural properties that unite most journals—editorial boards, mission statements, indexing, themed issues, cover art, and advertising—it is easy to overlook that as a literary form, they are polyphonic, polysemic, and often interdisciplinary cultural artifacts. Journals have the potential to reflect, contest, and transform the landscapes of intellectual and cultural production, as well as the political and social realities to which they are tied. Moreover, their formal properties can be mobilized to undermine the universalist category of “culture” itself. Some of these points might not be new to scholars in Avant-Garde, Modernist or Periodical Studies, particularly in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European or Hemispheric contexts. The question remains, however, what would such an argument look like outside of the strict theorizations of the avant-garde as a distinct moment or aesthetic within the historicization of literary modernity as a European or Hemispheric project? Put otherwise, if we take the journal to be an artistic or literary form based upon aesthetic, formal, and political multivocality, how would this impact the kinds of reading practices we apply to it as a cultural artifact, and its place within various critical archives, such as that of decolonization? To do so, I argue, would be to reimagine print culture as constitutive of, rather than epiphenomenal to, complex historical formations such as decolonization.[4]

Recent scholarship within the fields of Avant-Garde, Modernist, and Periodical Studies has sought to destabilize the ways in which artistic, literary, and cultural movements are theorized as revolutionary, militant, or anti-authoritarian. These scholars argue that theories of the avant-garde are hemmed in by a periodization of literary modernity with restrictive parameters as to what constitutes the space of “the political,” as well as the epochal, geo-political, or historical metrics used to measure "transformation." In their introduction to the special issue of *New Literary History* on "What is an Avant-Garde?," Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski propose that:

> whether the avant-garde represents a discrete moment or a series of moments in the intellectual history of modernity or a more diffuse aesthetic or political ethos, its currency resides as much in the history of grappling with its valences as in the diverse works and movements collected under its name. (vi)

Not entirely unlike the teleology of political or intellectual decline and awakening that undergirds the Inḥiṭaṭ/Nahḍa narrative, theories of the avant-garde follow a similarly melancholic and anthropocentric arc of "birth, youthful insurrection, and death," that ultimately champions a developmental narrative of European (literary) modernity, "condemning all subsequent forms of radical art to repetition, belatedness, and bad faith" (Eburne and Felski vii).[5] Expanding inquiries into radical, avant-garde, counter-cultural, or revolutionary art beyond the yardstick of European modernity has the potential to offer "a more variegated picture of the histories of avant-garde practice, one characterized by nonsynchrony, multiple temporalities, repetition, and difference" (ix). It requires, however, a diachronic and non-Eurocentric reading of the complex historical dynamics that condition the evolving theorization and praxis of radicalism(s). The conceptual vocabulary of revolution, autonomy, anarchy, change, futurity, innovation, experimentation, and even culture varies greatly across geopolitical and historical contexts—particularly since the "schism between aesthetic innovation and political transformation" is itself fraught within the European canon of the avant-garde (x).

I argue that one cannot address this lacuna within Eurocentric periodizations of literary modernity through the world-systems-theory binary language of center and periphery. Instead, I follow Timothy Mitchell's nuanced reading of the proliferations and fraught negotiations of "capitalist modernity."[6] In troubling the temporal and spatial axes by which modernity is historicized, Mitchell defines it as the staging rather than a stage of history (23). He writes:

> If colonial modernities often prefigure the emergence of modern forms and programs in the West . . . their significance is not in enabling us to revise the narrative of the West and to provide an alternative history of origins and influences. . . . [T]he pluralist language of alternative modernities always presupposes an underlying unity in reference to which such variations can be discussed. . . . Modernity, like capitalism, is defined by its claim to universality, to a uniqueness, unity, and universality that represent the end (in every sense) of history. Yet this always remains an impossible unity, an incomplete universal. Each staging of the modern must be arranged to produce the unified, global history of modernity, yet each requires those forms of difference that introduce the possibility of a discrepancy, that return to undermine its unity and identity. Modernity then becomes the unsuitable yet unavoidable name for all these discrepant histories. (24)

Some of these points have recently made their way into critical literature on the methodologies of Periodical Studies. Writing nearly a decade after the advent of the field, Patrick Collier reflects upon the critical evolution of Modern Periodical Studies. He notes that while the field has experienced lateral growth in terms of its archive—notably articulated as an increase in the types of periodicals studied, and not a geospatial move to integrate materials from outside of the European and Hemispheric canon of modernist or avant-garde literature—there needs to be a more coherent and collaborative effort to rethink its methodological assumptions. Collier rightfully calls attention to the modernist grand narrative that undergirds most scholarship on periodicals of the last decade. He proposes combating this conceptual overdeterminism with a combination of close, distant, and surface readings, that take journals as autonomous yet networked cultural artifacts. To treat the journal as a holistic "object of knowledge," bridges the divide between cultural and aesthetic approaches to the periodical (Collier 100). It further redirects critical energies to the journal as a literary, cultural, aesthetic, and commercial form, whose value-economy operates across all these spheres.

It is worth noting, however, that I do not wish to diminish the significant ways in which historical formations have had material and immaterial repercussions on the development and evolution of cultural moments, practices, or institutions. Rather, I argue against the dangers of granting cultural artifacts, such as periodicals, critical value only in so far as they reflect back to us canonical historiographical narratives or categories. This article thus treats decolonization as multiple, asynchronous, and contested historical formations. Similarly, it highlights the ways in which culture is continually imagined, challenged, and reformulated not only across, but also within, these formations. Moving away from a historically fixed conceptualization of culture reveals a spectrum of ideational and ideological hues that might otherwise be subsumed under the grand narratives of historical periodization. Bringing these different theoretical concerns into the fore, my analysis of Tunisian journals highlights at once the aesthetic, formal, and ideological dimensions of this archive. Rather than taming the unruly edges of the journal as a form to fit within a specific narrative of cultural decolonization, I emphasize its multivocality with respects to both content and form. Since the journal is an inherently prolific medium that lacks the self-containment of the novel, this article will limit its focus to three Arabic cultural journals, and analyze one special issue of *al-Fikr* from 1956.

Tunisian Culture in/of/and The World

Tunisian literary journals played a foundational role in shaping the debates and policies that came to define the country's cultural identities both during and after French occupation, and in notably distinct ways from other countries of the Maghreb. The 1930s, in particular, were a vibrant period of Tunisia's cultural and literary history. Unlike in Algeria and Morocco, much of this intellectual production was done in Arabic rather than in French. Two notable cultural journals from this period are *al-*

ʻAlam al-Adabī, founded in 1930 by Zayn al-ʻAbdīn al-Sinusī, and *al-Mabāḥith*, established by Muḥammad al-Bashrush in 1938 and then helmed by al-Masʻadī between 1944 and 1947. Douja Mamelouk writes that *al-ʻAlam al-Adabī* "is unknown to the West and is all but forgotten in most contemporary Tunisian academic circles" (2). Mohammed-Salah Omri similarly argues that the journal laid the blueprints for early print culture in Tunisia, even if some of its founding intellectuals remained below the radar. One of its leading contributors, ʻAli al-Duʻaji, for example, died in relative obscurity despite his prolific oeuvre of

> 163 radio plays; 15 plays for the theater, which he also directed; 500 songs and poems in the Tunisian dialect; his narrative, "Jawla," published in *al-ʻAlam al-Adabi* in 1933; collections of stories; an unpublished novel; numerous cartoons; and a one-man newspaper, *al-Surur* (Omri, "History" 295).

Omri also describes *al-Mabāḥith* as *al-ʻAlam al-Adabī*'s intellectual successor, and its figurehead al-Masʻadī as al-Duʻaji's "symbiotic other" ("History" 295). Al-Masʻadī attempted to bring al-Duʻaji's intellectual and artistic legacy into focus by posthumously republishing his work in *al-Mabāḥith*.

In the somewhat limited Anglophone scholarship on al-Duʻaji (1909-1949) and al-Masʻadī (1911-2004), as well as their respective periodicals *al-ʻAlam al-Adabī* and *al-Mabāḥith*, the emphasis has been simultaneously on their singularity as public intellectuals, and their epitomization of a particular intellectual current within Tunisian critical and literary thought. Scholars such as Mamelouk and Omri highlight their delicate balancing act of engaging with a wide range of philosophical, critical, and literary sources from the European tradition, alongside a political investment in fomenting a national Tunisian culture built upon a Mediterranean, Arab, and/or Islamic *turāth* (heritage). That said, the two figures differ greatly in terms of their use and theorization of Arabic in relation to national culture. While al-Duʻaji wrote to a large extent in colloquial Tunisian Arabic, or a blend of dialectical and Modern Standard Arabic, al-Masʻadī penned his literary and critical works in a dense register of literary Arabic that bordered on the anachronistic. In both cases, however, their linguistic and literary choices signaled a subversion of existing cultural orders as they related to both imperial and nationalist ideological camps. It is said that al-Du'aji and his rambunctious literary salon—known as *Jama'at taḥt al-sūr* ("the below-the-wall gathering"), in reference to the café where its members congregated—wanted "to mark their protest against Mohamed al-'Arbi al-Kabbadi's classical Arabic literary group, which met in *Maqha al-banka al-'iryana* (a popular café in the old city of Tunis)" (Mamelouk 2). The writings of al-Mas'adī and others in *al-Mabāḥith*, by contrast, drew stylistically and thematically upon the classical Arabic and Islamic literary heritage—and particularly its relationship to philosophical and spiritual inquiries into the nature of human existence. Thus, while both approaches share a rejection of French as the presumed language of "literary modernity" in the colonies, they vary in their conceptualization of said modernity.

Al-'Alam al-Adabī oriented itself around a populist vision of nationalist culture in dialogue with world literary trends and debates.[7] Contrastingly, *al-Mabāḥith* exerted a wide influence across the Arab world throughout its forty-five issues: "Covering literature, art, history, and philosophy, it enjoyed wide appeal in Tunisia and abroad, reaching a circulation of seven thousand in 1947 at a time when the average circulation of similar periodicals was two thousand" (Omri, "History" 287-88). *Al-Mabāḥith's* literary content is highly philosophical in nature, and the editors dissuaded didactic approaches to national literature, or the use of dialect as part of their distinct aesthetic vision. Despite their differing approaches to the Arabic language, however, both periodicals employed, and even encouraged, the use of neologisms—thereby engaging with an international lexicon of technical and conceptual vocabulary, while still preserving the Arabic language as the conduit for national or anti-colonial culture.

In some ways, *al-Fikr* picked up where *al-Mabāḥith* and *al-'Alam al-Adabī* left off, even sharing many of the same contributors. Labeled a cultural journal (revue culturelle menseulle in French and *majalla thaqāfīyya* in Arabic), the journal was published by al-Sharika al-Tūnisīyya l-Funūn al-Rasm (The Tunisian Graphic Arts Company) and ran 10 issues per year, at the initial cost of 100 francs. The first two years of the journal included arresting graphic images by the renowned Tunisian painter Hatem El Mekki (1918-2003), before the covers became largely text-based. As one of the first cultural journals to help usher in Tunisia's official independence in 1956, however, *al-Fikr* shared a very different kind of relationship with state institutions and initiatives than either of its predecessors, or similar periodicals launched in neighboring countries of the Maghreb. This distinctive feature of *al-Fikr* requires some brief context on Tunisia's political situation in the 1950s, to which I will now turn.

As anti-colonial sentiments were mounting during the 1930s, Tunisian nationalists were becoming increasingly frustrated with the perceived political pacifism and complacency of the old-guard bourgeois Dustūr party (al-Ḥizb al-Ḥurr al-Dustūrī or the Constitutional Liberal Party). The party was fraught with internal factions, largely triggered by the more militant approach of Habib Bourguiba, whose vehemently anti-colonial publication, *L'action tunisienne*, called for independence in 1933. His subsequent expulsion from the party in 1934 resulted in the formation of the Neo-Dustūr party (al-Ḥizb al-Ḥurr al-Dustūrī al-Jadīd or the New Constitutional Liberal Party). The members of the splinter party were younger in age, often educated in Europe, and adopted a more self-consciously radical approach to the issue of decolonization. Capitalizing on their connections with rural parts of the country and the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) established in 1946, the party solidified a national anti-colonial stronghold across Tunisia (Zemmi 133-34). The periodic imprisonment of Bourguiba as well as other party members, alongside the instability of WWII, briefly subdued the party's efforts as members disagreed on whether they should align themselves with the Allies. Bourguiba was eventually released in 1943, just as the party forged its allegiance with the workers' movement through the reconstitution of Tunisia's labor unions. At the close of WWII, Bourguiba left Tunisia to seek international support before returning in 1949. The party was only officially recognized by French officials in 1951. Tensions continued to mount as France finally agreed to engage in talks about the process of decolonization, following an appeal by the Neo-Dustūr party to the United Nations. In 1955, an accord was produced that granted Tunisia internal independence. After deep conflicts within the party that resulted in the expulsion of General Ṣāliḥ Bin Yūsuf—a Pan-Arabist who eventually took refuge in Nasserist Egypt—Bourguiba cemented his position at the helm of the Neo-Dustūr party. Following Morocco's independence in 1956, Tunisia was officially granted full independence and Bourguiba's Neo-Dustūr party won the majority of votes in the elections for a constituent assembly. Bourguiba became Prime Minister of the newly established Republic in what was to become a two-decade one-party state. He was eventually unseated from power in 1987 by Zīn al-'Ābidīn Bin 'Alī, who was himself dethroned during the Tunisian uprisings in 2011.

The history of Tunisia's independence and the inner workings of the Neo-Dustūr party under Bourguiba's leadership are critical to my argument about the relationship between decolonization and print culture. Firstly, the newspaper *L'action tunisienne* (1932-1988) was germane to Bourguiba's emergence as both a public intellectual and a politician, in addition to signaling the importance of print media in the archives of decolonization. Secondly, Bourguiba as a figure represents some of the seemingly incommensurable attributes of Tunisia's history of decolonization. Educated largely in France, Bourguiba did not shy away from political or intellectual dialogue with Europe. He was also perceived as a secularist, in so far as his platform—in stark contrast to the situation in Algeria and Morocco—did not entail Islamicization, but rather absorbed the two Shari'a courts into the state (see Salem). In fact, it is argued that much of the internal party tensions between Bourguiba and Bin Yūsuf were around their conflicting approaches to the question of decolonization. While Bin Yūsuf identified with the Pan-Arabism championed by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and expressed sympathies and allegiance with Islamic institutions such as al-Zaytūna (Perkins 122), Bourguiba's proposed policies—particularly the Personal Status Code—highlighted such issues as gender equality and education reform (140). He was also militant in his pursuit for a fully autonomous, as well as politically, ideologically, and culturally decolonized Tunisia.

The platforms of both Bourguiba and the Neo-Dustūr party, thus, at once acknowledged the challenges of decolonization, while attempting to forge a path for Tunisia that embraced its past as it looked to the future. This has led, in part, to the reification of a kind of Manichean dualism that pits East/West and Secular/Islamic in an Orientalist clash of civilizations narrative that is frequently mobilized in discussions of decolonization and postcolonial subjectivity in the context of the Middle East and North Africa. As Kenneth Perkins writes with respect to the political and ideological schisms within the Neo-Dustūr party that were symbolized by Bin Yūsuf and Bourguiba: "the tensions between the two men were real—on the personal level, with regard to tactics, and in terms of their increasingly divergent global orientations (ben Yusuf to the Arab and Islamic worlds, Bourguiba to the West)—and they eyed each other warily" (123). Perkins adds that unlike Atatürk's sweeping reforms in Turkey, Bourguiba positioned himself as "reinterpreting [Islam] through *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning" (140). He thus calls attention to the diverse ways in which state structures work with Islamic institutions and philosophies, even as they appear to be absorbing their power.

The journal *al-Fikr* emerged within and through this climate of decolonization, as Bourguiba and his fellow party members were outlining educational, social, and political reforms to implement in the newly independent Tunisian state. Founded on the eve of independence in 1955 by Muḥammad Mzālī—the perceived successor of Bourguiba whom he appointed as Prime Minister of the Republic from 1980-1986—*al-Fikr* was simultaneously a mouthpiece for Neo-Dustūrian ideology, and also a medium for the exploration of critical thought as a vehicle for social and political transformation. Some critics have argued, somewhat disparagingly, that these seemingly oppositional forces were explored in isolation without any sincere attempts to synthesize or integrate their polarities (see Barakat and Zartman). In treating the cultural journal as an inherently polyphonic form within the variegated histories of avant-garde and modernist movements, I instead argue for their dialectical relationship to one another. Novelist and literary scholar Halim Barakat writes that consistent with Neo-Dustūrian ideology, the foundational tenets of *al-Fikr* resided in "three major concepts as being essential to the national character of independent Tunisia: openness to the West, Arab-Islamic identity, and Tunisization" (46). While Barakat provides ample examples of editorials and articles that foreground these three precepts, his insistence on their structural independence reveals a reluctance to engage with their co-constitutional nature in the service of "disrupt[ing] the powerful story of modernity, rather than contribut[ing] to its globalization" (Mitchell 7). The language of trying to "reconcile the dualities and polarities arising from the competing pulls of the West and the Arab East, the Arabic and French languages, tradition and modernity (*al-salafīyya wa-al-muāṣara*)" implies an epistemological or ontological incommensurability that is destined to fail in its very formulation (Barakat 45).

Similarly, William Zartman analyzes the data collected in unpublished research by the Center for the Study of the Modern Arab World at St. Joseph's University in Beirut, showing how it adopts

> the Coefficient of Authenticity (an adaptation of an index introduced by Lasswell and Leites), which measures the prevalence of statements favoring authenticity in Arab culture relative to the prevalence of those favoring openness toward non-Arab culture and those which are neutral. (Zartman 23)

The study features periodicals from across the Middle East and North Africa published between the 1940s and the 1970s, including *al-Fikr*. It measures the balance of cultural "authenticity" versus "openness" numerically, employing a scale of +4 for full authenticity and -4 for complete openness, with 0 as the neutral indicator. According to the study, Maghrebi cultural journals averaged +0.5 from 1954 to 1950 and 1965 to 1970, and 0 for the 1955 to 1960 period. While Zartman points out the obvious methodological limitations of such a study, he still accepts the indicators of "authenticity" and "openness"—albeit suggesting that they be read through the lens of thesis, synthesis, and antithesis, rather than oppositionally (24). I instead propose that we examine these forces as a series of asynchronous events, positions, and affiliations, that converge and diverge across the temporal as well as geographical axes of various historical formations, such as decolonization. By way of example, I will now turn my attention to a special issue from *al-Fikr*'s second year in circulation.

On the Nature of Questioning

The special issue of *al-Fikr* employs the mode of the questionnaire—a fledgling subfield within Modernist and Periodical Studies—and a fascinating counterpoint to the manifesto as the genre par excellence of the avant-garde. The questionnaire offers a microcosm of the cultural or literary journal, with notable rhetorical and stylistic differences. It presents side-by-side—rather than consolidating, as the manifesto might—multiple intellectual interventions (Cole 115). In its mobilization of the questionnaire, issue 9 of *al-Fikr*—published shortly after Tunisia's independence in June 1956—offers a fascinating window through which to see the inner machinations of the journal's aesthetic, formal, and political preoccupations around decolonization and national independence.

Al-Fikr generally opens with an editorial on the particular issue's theme—often in relation to current events in Tunisia and the ongoing self-critical reframing of the journal's mission and goals. The bulk of the content consists of literature (prose, theater, poetry), literary theory (covering world literature, in addition to historical and contemporary works from the Middle East and North Africa), philosophy, as well as political and social commentary (on topics ranging from education, women's liberation, regional and world events, and the ever-popular question of youth, or *al-shabāb*). This is usually followed by letters to and responses from the editorial team, calls for submissions, editorial corrections, events, talks, and the announcement of new publications. In this particular issue, the journal's editorial team—signed, as always, collectively as *hay'at al-taḥrir*—write that they circulated a series of 10 questions on the future of Tunisia's national culture (*mustaqbal al-thaqāfa*) among a number of "professors and thinkers from Tunisia and the Arab world" (1). Referred to as a collective "project" (*mashrū'*), the questionnaire is framed around:

> the different matters [related to] culture and its diverse aspects, in the hopes that it will clarify some of the concepts [*mafāhīm*] that have been speculated upon without awareness or understanding; and that the reader finds the motivation for research, exploration, and debate. We have published all the answers and welcomed all views, asking that the reader compare them and go beyond them [*yatajāwazhā*]. (1)

The opening editorial subsequently sets the stage for an investigation into the future of Tunisian national culture as a project replete with diverse opinions, stakes, and theories. It further proposes that the reader should independently glean from the different responses a vision of cultural development that surpasses its constitutive components. That said, by virtue of opening the issue with a jointly signed editorial, the journal consolidates a community—of contributors, writers, statesmen, and readers—even as it claims to open up the debate to diverse opinions from within said community. This invitation to the journal's readers thus promises a dialogue and debate among the country's cultural architects and intellectuals.

Writing about the twentieth-century Latin American avant-garde in both Cuba and the diaspora, Lori Cole theorizes the relationship between the magazine and questionnaires. She writes that the questionnaire, while formally open-ended, still operates around a shared aesthetic vision:

> Unlike a manifesto whose signatories aligned with a single polemical text, the questionnaire produced a patchwork of responses, offering a composite portrait of a community. . . . As ongoing canon-building enterprises, magazines aimed to remain present and active, and the questionnaire allowed them to reflect on their function as they continued to accrue in cultural value. . . . The most significant contribution of the genre was the act of asking, and the questions were as revealing as any answers. (115).

Before I turn to the questions themselves, I would like to address a brief editorial titled "Word from the Minister of Education" ("*Kalimat Wazīr al-Maʻārif*"), signed by al-Amīn al-Shābbī, that appears between the opening letter from the editors, and the questions themselves. Al-Shābbī was the brother of the renowned Tunisian poet, Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī, whose words were immortalized both in the Tunisian national anthem, and, more recently, as an anti-regime slogan in the 2011 toppling of former president Bin ʻAlī. He served a two-year term as the first Minister of Education under Bourguiba, before al-Masʻadī took over from 1958-1968. In the editorial, he outlines the concerns at the heart of the questionnaire, and the journal *al-Fikr* more broadly: namely, to extend Tunisian culture beyond the newly secured borders of the Tunisian nation-state. He writes: "This excellent issue of the journal *al-Fikr* exposes one of the most difficult problems of our current era, and it is not a problem exclusive to Tunisia, or the Arab World—rather it is the problem of world culture in the twentieth century" (2). Al-Shābbī describes a transformed geopolitical and socio-cultural landscape, in which cultures are as interconnected as global economies and the various policies that uphold them. He thus subtly cautions readers (and by extension, Tunisians) against the possibility of a world unchanged by capitalist imperialism and the challenges of decolonization.

Al-Shābbī suggests that the Tunisian national project not only look within and beyond Tunisia, but also backwards and forward in time. He writes: "Let us then abandon our current definition of 'culture' and return to its older Arabic signification, so that we may preserve its combination of knowledge [*al-maʻrifa*] and education/rearing [*al-tarbīyya*]" (2). For al-Shābbī, this needs to be a collective rather than individualistic (*fardīyya*) undertaking. He proposes that the spirit (*rūḥ*) of national education (*al-tarbīyya al-qawmīyya*) not stop at the doors of Tunisian or Arab cultural heritage (*turāth*), but that it unify them and exceed their respective horizons (*afāq*). He thus calls for preserving Tunisianness (*al-dhātīyya al-Tunsīyya*), while highlighting its best characteristics (*khasā'isuhā al-ṣāliḥa*). Al-Shābbī closes by thanking the journal *al-Fikr* for initiating a dialogue around this cooperative undertaking (*al-mas'ūlīyya al-mushtaraka*). The editorial thus harkens back to the concept of *adab* in its theorization of culture as entailing both individual as well as social modes of knowledge production, cultivation, and praxis. It envisions culture as a rhizomatic project that grows, evolves, adapts, and creates, using all the resources at its disposal. The emphasis on the reader/citizen as an active agent in, and contributor to, the cultural process is also not to be overlooked. The journal optimistically casts Tunisian citizens as amongst the architects of the country's cultural development project.[8]

Bearing these polemical openings in mind, I will now turn to the questionnaire itself. The ten questions proposed to the issue's contributors are as follows:

> 1) What is your general understanding of the concept of culture [*mafhūm al-thaqāfa*]?
> 2) We would like to know your opinion on the difference between culture and education [*ta'līm*], as well as what determines this difference?
> 3) What is the concept of Western culture?
> 4) What is the concept of Eastern culture?
> 5) What is your understanding of Arab culture? Is Arabic only a language [*līsān*]? Or is Arabic the historical language of Islam? Or do you apply the concept of Arab/ic culture onto the concept of Islamic culture?
> 6) Is this culture—whether it be Arab alone or Arab-Islamic—singular [*wāḥīda*] or multiple [*muta'addida*]?
> 7) Do you perceive Arab or Arab-Islamic culture as characterized by the attributes of other [cultures]?
> 8) What are the major trends [*ittijāhāt*] that appear to you to be in most conflict with [*tatanāz'*] contemporary Arab culture, and what are the forces shaping these very trends?
> 9) Do we have a national culture in Tunisia, and by what means can one know it?
> 10) How do you envisage the future of culture in Tunisia? (*al-Fikr* 3)

Putting aside the rhetorical style of repetition and differentiation mobilized by the questionnaire, its questions follow a trajectory from the abstract and universal to the specific and particular. The text moves from the definition of concepts and categories—without explicitly questioning their epistemological validity—to their application. In some ways, the series of questions reads like an exercise in conceptual parsing. To answer the final question, the text presupposes that one has accepted assumptions and conceptual categories germane to the discursive construction of the questionnaire as a whole. The holistic unity of the survey, then, assumes the existence of discrete "cultures" that come into contact and occasional conflict with one another. It also clearly suggests that the project of national culture is a state concern housed within the institutional structure of public education—although education and knowledge are here intertwined in much the same way suggested by the Minister of Education al-Shābbī's earlier invocation of *adab*.

Beyond these rhetorical and stylistic concerns, the questionnaire clearly implies an existing or imagined relationship between Arab and Islamic cultures, although it acknowledges that these might be manifold cultural orders. Question 7 even suggests that Arab and Islamic cultures have been exposed to "outside" influences. Question 8 further implies that such influences or cultures might be perceived as antagonistic to "contemporary Arab culture," which is here rendered in the singular. While this might undermine the idea of cultures operating in static isolation to one another, the direction of influence is presumed to be from "West" to "East." Similarly, the questions probe the relationship between the Arabic language and Arab (ethnic) identity—and, by extension, Arabic as the language of Qur'anic revelation and thus the official language of Islam. This must be historicized within the context of North Africa, where non-Arab ethnic identities predated the advent and spread of Islam, and share a highly fraught relationship with various nation-states and empires within the region. In most cases, these forces consistently, and often violently, attempted to subsume non-Arab populations under Arab and Muslim identities. In Tunisia, such realities are less prominent than in Morocco and Algeria, where Berberophone populations had more pronounced ideological and physical altercations with the state and its efforts at both Arabization and Islamicization.

The responses to the questions are individually presented after the questionnaire. Some address the questions in chronological order, while others jump around or aggregate their replies. Given that a number of the responses are explicitly addressed to the founder and Editor in Chief of *al-Fikr*, the future Prime Minister Mūḥammad Mzālī, it seems likely that the questionnaire was written by him, rather than the editorial board. As for the content of the responses, they differ greatly both stylistically and ideologically. Some presuppose the categories of East and West as fixed and potentially antagonistic entities. This is the case with ʻAlī al-Bahlawān (1909-1958)—a Neo-Dustūrian nationalist educator, statesman, and intellectual, who specialized in philosophy and Arabic literature—whose response is entitled "*Thaqāfatuna bayn al-sharq wa-l-gharb*" (Our Culture Between the East and the West).[9] Others adopt a more cautious approach, some even expressing their ambivalence around the formulation of the questions.

The Tunisian critic Maḥjūb Bin Mīlād (1916-2000), for example, opens his response by delicately describing his reservations about replying to the questions, and his inclination to proceed "cautiously" (*ḥarīsan*) in parsing out the fate (*maṣīr*) of the journal *al-Fikr* and Tunisian culture more broadly (28). A notable figure within Tunisia's philosophical and literary history, Bin Mīlād is said to have

> offered young Tunisians an ideology that had been inspired by neo-muʻtazilism (i.e., a world view based on reason). This doctrine emphasized the possibility of freedom in the face of divine omnipotence and rational notions about good and evil. He believed that, to accomplish intellectual renewal in Tunisia, one needs to throw open the doors of "*ijtihâd*" (individual reflection). (Fontaine and Slama 185)

In this vein, the preamble to Bin Mīlād's response calls attention to the questionnaire itself, particularly its lack of clarification of the terms, and the formulation (*al-ṣīgha*) of the questions themselves. He writes that he takes the questions and their purpose (*al-āghrāḍ*) at face value, with the assumption that *al-Fikr* is using them to attack military terminology (*iṣṭilāḥ al-ʻaskarīyyīn*). He adds that the project of national culture has no single author, but rather joins the voices of many in their collective pursuit of innovation. Bin Mīlād refers to the questionnaire as a broad invitation (*al-da‘wā al-‘arīḍa*) to Tunisia's *udabā'* (littérateurs). *Al-Fikr* then serves as a meeting place for their various intellectual affiliations and debates (28-30). Platitudes aside, Bin Mīlād's response touches on a number of points relevant to my argument. His critique of the formulaic and unqualified nature of the questions—softened by the jab at militaristic terminology—flags *al-Fikr* as operating within certain state structures of power that it simultaneously seeks to undermine. Bin Mīlād's emphasis on the journal's attempt to open up a collective dialogue that embraces differences of opinion further mirrors his philosophical and ethical interest in freedom of thought and individual reasoning—points that frequently make their way into the journal's editorials and essays.

The cover illustration that (see Fig. 1) graces this special issue perfectly synthesizes my broader argument about the distinct ideological and formal qualities of *al-Fikr*, and Tunisian cultural journals of this period more generally. El Mekki's cover art presents a frame in which we literally see the world divided along geopolitical axes: with the "East" to the right, and the "West" to the left. The stark divide between the natural world associated with the East—the flower, tree, bird, and horse—contrasts with the West's invocation of mobility (the treadmill), worldliness (the globe in lieu of a face), and science (the geometric lines and shapes). Despite this obvious Manichean dualism, however, the faceless and denuded anonymity and mechanical nature of the left window provide a fascinating counterpoint to the human(e) face of the East—which notably undermines the aniconism often associated with representational art from the Muslim world. The thoughtful sideways glance of the "Eastern" man to the West further contrasts with his feet pointing to the East—notably, the same direction as the "Western" man. Rather than conveying an ideological incommensurability, I propose that such subtleties, instead, reflect a *Weltanschauung* divided by various ideological stakes, but also in dynamic and relational movement.

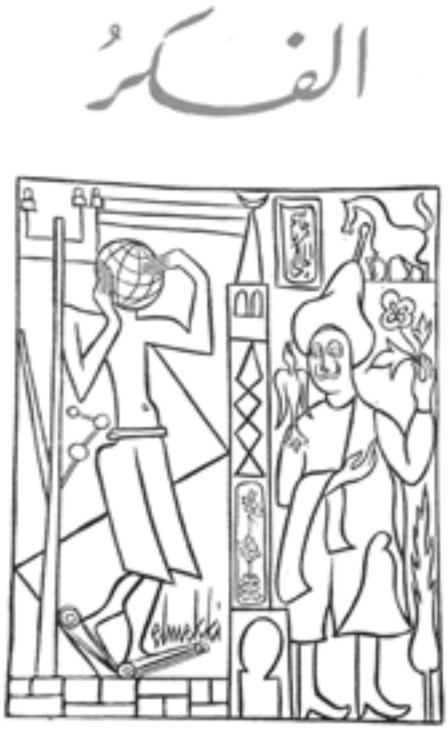

Fig. 1

This article proposes that we shift away from the psycho-pathological discourse of anxiety over imitation, appropriation, and acculturation, to instead consider this wariness as a structural function of capitalist imperialism and the modern formations it belies.[10] Subsequently, I read the questionnaire published in *al-Fikr* not as revealing the fraught concerns of a fragile intelligentsia always trying, but never succeeding, in measuring up against a monolithic European modernity, or of serving up a belated simulacrum, or even of seeking to attain global currency within a Eurocentric yet seemingly internationalist avant-garde cultural movement. Rather, I propose that the very act of questioning (and even questioning the questioning) repositions this wariness as constructive rather than debilitating, and in the service of a broader project of intellectual inquiry. One can trace this shift across the very terrain of these cultural journals—from the invocation of a fixed object of knowledge in the title of *al-'Alam al-Adabī* (The Literary World), to the more philosophical and inquisitive designations of *al-Mabāḥith* (Investigations) and *al-Fikr* (Contemplation) as engaged acts of inquiry—at once individual and collective. The shift further invites us to pause on, and perhaps reevaluate, the presumed relationship between emerging intellectual interventions and inchoate state structures within the context of decolonization.

Notes

[*] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Arabic are my own.

[1] Beyond the examples cited in this piece, I would add Yasmine Ramadan, Elizabeth Holt, Hoda Yousef, and Elizabeth Kendall.

[2] Jocelyn Hendrickson's study addresses, in part, some of these considerations in its practical assessment of the archives and libraries available to Arabophone scholars in Morocco. Recent technological developments—such as the move to digitize archives and library catalogues as well as holdings, alongside the regional political events beginning in 2011—have shifted the landscape dramatically since the article's publication in 2008.

[3] The American University in Cairo's library recently developed an online repository for digitized press materials from the MENA region: http://libguides.aucegypt.edu/content.php?pid=574389&sid=4774255. The Moroccan national library, Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc, also recently digitized most of the archive of So*uffles-Anfas*'s brief press run: http://bnm.bnrm.ma:86/ListeVol.aspx?IDC=3 (for Souffles) and http://bnm.bnrm.ma:86/ListeVol.aspx?IDC=4 (for Anfas). Notably, some of the more controversial issues—particularly those that attacked the Moroccan government on the question of the Western Sahara or human rights violations—are missing from the collection, although physical copies are available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

[4] This is not entirely dissimilar to Benedict Anderson's theorization of print culture, capitalism, and modernity in *Imagined Communities*, although it moves beyond the geographical restrictions of his study to suggest how such lacuna reify Orientalist and Eurocentric historiographies.

[5] The Nahḍa, or Arab cultural "renaissance," is said to have followed *'Asr al-Inḥiṭaṭ* (the Age of Decline/Decadence) and is bookended by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the close of WWI—

a periodization that credits European colonial "modernity" for the resuscitation of Arab literary, cultural, and scientific production. Scholars such as Muhsin al-Musawi, Tarek El-Ariss, Elizabeth Holt, Boutheina Khaldi, Samah Selim, Shaden Tageldin, Jeffrey Sacks, and Stephen Sheehi have critically revisited the Orientalist and developmentalist nature of the Nahḍa as a historical narrative.

[6] Mitchell shares this critical landscape with such scholars as Ann Laura Stoler, Frederick Cooper, Arjun Appadurai, and Gyan Prakash.

[7] Mamelouk credits this to al-Du'aji's "cosmopolitan" knowledge of both French and Italian languages and intellectual traditions (3).

[8] It is worth noting that my emphasis here is on the rhetoric mobilized within *al-Fikr* during its initial years. History has shown that the actualized project of Tunisian state-building as well as the institutions and structures that were to emerge from it were extremely fraught and far more complex than this artilce is able to do justice to. Moreover, Bourguiba's infamous cult of personality signaled a marked departure from the discourse of collectivity expounded in the journal's early editorials.

[9] This is the title that appears above his response itself. According to the Index, the title is indicated as "*al-Thaqāfa bayn al-sharq wa-l-gharb*" (Culture Between the East and the West).

[10] The term "anxiety" appears in some of these primary materials themselves, and much of the subsequent secondary scholarship on them. For examples, see Cole, Ramadan, Zartman.

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