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The Self and the Other:

Between Religious Belief and Social Reality

الأنا والآخر بين الانتماء الديني والواقع الاجتماعي

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Abstract:

The dialectic between the self and the other is present, either directly or implicitly, in various human interactions, whether at the cultural level between peoples, or at the social level through ethnic, religious, linguistic and gender differences, among other manifestations of difference that are difficult to enumerate. This duality has attracted the attention of multiple fields of knowledge and diverse intellectual trends, leading to variations in its meanings depending on the criteria used to define it and the mechanisms employed to utilise it.

The formation of the self is not a process that occurs in isolation from others; rather, it occurs within the context of relationships with them, whether these relationships are close (you), distant (them), or nearby (us). In this context, an anthropological approach to the dialectic of the self and the other is adopted through a study of Algerian society, with a focus on the Beni Mazab community. This community relocated from southern Algeria to the north in order to engage in trade, a profession that requires openness and constant communication with

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others. Nevertheless, this group maintains a certain degree of self-enclosure in order to preserve its cultural and religious identity in the face of the dominant culture.

Drawing upon the findings of a field study conducted in the Constantine region, this study aims to monitor the manifestations of the identity debate in its religious and social dimensions. The central question to be addressed is as follows: The present study seeks to explore the impact of sectarian difference on the relationship between the Mazabians and the Constantinians. The present study seeks to ascertain whether religious-sectarian identity in this context assumes a confrontational or communicative character.

Keywords: Identity; Other; Ethnic Community; Integration; Bani Mzab; Ibadism.

ملخص:

تُعدّ جدلية الأنا والآخر حاضرة بشكل مباشر أو ضمني في مختلف التفاعلات الإنسانية، سواء على المستوى الثقافي بين الشعوب، أو الاجتماعي من خلال الفروقات العرقية والدينية واللغوية والجندرية، وغيرها من مظاهر الاختلاف التي يصعب حصرها. وقد حظيت هذه الثنائية باهتمام حقول معرفية متعددة واتجاهات فكرية متنوعة، مما أفضى إلى تباين دلالاتها تبعًا لمعايير تحديدها وآليات توظيفها.

فالأنا لا يتشكل في معزل عن الآخر، بل يتكون في صلب العلاقة به، سواء كان الآخر لصيقًا (أنت)، أو جمعيًا بعيدًا (هم)، أو قريبًا (نحن). وفي هذا السياق، سنعتمد مقاربة أنثروبولوجية لجدلية الأنا والآخر من خلال دراسة المجتمع الجزائري، حيث نركز على جماعة بني مزاب الذين انتقلوا من جنوب الجزائر إلى شمالها بهدف ممارسة التجارة، وهي مهنة تقتضي الانفتاح والتواصل المستمر مع الآخر. ومع ذلك، تحرص هذه الجماعة على قدر من الانغلاق الذاتي للحفاظ على خصوصيتها الثقافية والدينية في مواجهة ثقافة المجتمع السائد.

وانطلاقًا من دراسة ميدانية بمنطقة قسنطينة، سنسعى إلى رصد تجليات هذا الجدل الهوياتي بأبعاده الدينية والاجتماعية، للإجابة عن الإشكالية التالية: كيف يؤثر الاختلاف المذهبي في العلاقة بين المزابيين والقسنطينيين؟ وهل تتخذ الهوية الدينية–المذهبية هنا طابعًا صراعيًا أم تواصليًا؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية؛ الآخر؛ الجماعة الإثنية؛ الاندماج؛ بني مزاب؛ الإباضية.

1. Introduction:

The intricate relationship between the self and the other has historically served as a foundational pillar of anthropological inquiry. In its nascent stages, anthropology positioned itself explicitly as the systematic science of the "other," particularly as a Western discipline deeply preoccupied with non-European cultures. During this era, the divergent "other" was frequently stigmatized and categorized through pejorative lenses as primitive, barbaric, or

savage. Pervaded by a patronizing, ethnocentric European bias, early anthropological studies were inextricably tethered to the global colonial enterprise. The findings of such research were routinely weaponized to construct ideological justifications for colonialism and to consolidate hegemonic control over colonized territories.

Algeria, under French colonial rule from the early 19th century onward, was subjected to an extensive corpus of colonial anthropological research. These endeavors evolved from initial exploratory missions into targeted academic studies perfectly aligned with overarching colonial agendas. The primary objective was to demystify the perceived enigma of Algerian society, rendering it legible and thus vulnerable to French domination. French colonization extended far beyond the mere expropriation of land; it aggressively engaged in the epistemological exploitation of anthropological research targeting the identity of the Algerian populace. This calculated exploitation aimed to systematically dismantle the robust networks of solidarity and cooperation that unified Algeria's diverse ethnic tapestry, which included Berbers, Chaouia, Arabs, Mazabis, and Taraghaoua. By institutionalizing a pernicious "divide and rule" policy, colonial authorities successfully fomented ethnic hostilities between local tribes and kingdoms. This internal friction diverted indigenous resistance away from the French adversary, thereby allowing the colonizers to cement their dominion.

In the post-independence era, anthropology in Algeria was initially regarded with profound suspicion, largely viewed as an imperial apparatus utterly devoid of relevance to the modern Algerian university. However, contemporary academic discourse reclaims anthropology as a potent, double-edged tool—one that must now be strategically deployed to cultivate a culture of national coexistence and unity among the country's diverse ethnic factions. Achieving this requires a rigorous unearthing of the underlying mental structures of Algerian society. As posited by Saeedi (2006-2007, p. 5), anthropology is fundamentally crucial for interpreting the social, cultural, economic, and doctrinal dimensions of the self, enabling researchers to transcend narrow ethnocentrism and engage in profound dialogues with the essence of societal logic. It equips scholars with the methodological apparatus necessary to analyze the popular self as an active, interactive agent within its socio-cultural ecosystem.

By yielding direct, scientific insights into daily social interactions, anthropology empowers researchers to decode how communities articulate their collective identities and conceptualize culturally disparate groups. Importantly, the "other" need not be geographically remote or a historical adversary; the other frequently exists in close proximity. In such proximate settings, the self may experience internal division predicated upon linguistic, lifestyle, or sect-based differences.

This study applies this localized anthropological lens to Algerian society, specifically embodying the "other" in the Bani Mzab community. This group's migration from the south to the north for commerce demands continuous social interaction, yet they fiercely guard their religious and cultural specificity against the dominant society through deliberate self-enclosure. The geographical and cultural locus of this study is the Constantine region, which functions as a microcosm for the dominant Algerian society. The researcher's own affiliation with this region facilitates a unique, immersive coexistence within this duality, sharing the dialects, traditions, and concerns of the Constantine public while observing the daily manifestations of similarity and difference exhibited by the Bani Mzab. Utilizing a functionalist methodology, this research frames field data—gathered via semi-structured, recorded interviews and participant observation—to analyze the social integration and systemic balance of the Bani Mzab in Constantine. The central research question asks: How does sectarian difference shape the relationship between the Mazabis and the Constantinians, and does this religious identity foster conflict *or communication?*.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In the social sciences, establishing a precise conceptual framework is an imperative methodological step. Guided by Kluckhohn's assertion that anthropology seeks empirical rather than strictly philosophical definitions (Mohamed Ibrahim & Al-Shawan, 1992, p. 108), the following section delineates the procedural concepts anchoring this study.

2.1. The Dialectic

Originating in philosophy, the term "dialectic" remains one of the most complex and contested concepts in intellectual history. Imam (2007, pp. 5-6) compares the fluidity of the term to the historical transformations of the word "philosophy" itself. Plato initially conceptualized the dialectic as an epistemological progression achieved through rigorously enhanced dialogue, a method echoing Socratic traditions (Jamal, 1982, p. 391). Later, Hegel revolutionized the concept by defining it as a logical progression wherein two contradictory

propositions are unified to yield a synthesized third proposition (Jamal, 1982, p. 393). Similarly, Asfour describes it as a dynamic process of mutual conflict and influence between opposing forces, resulting in a novel third component (Edith, 1993, pp. 378-379). Procedurally for this study, dialectic implies a binary relationship deeply characterized by both overt and covert forms of conflict and negotiation.

2.2. The Self and the Other

The duality of the "self" and the "other" represents an indivisible paradigm; neither concept possesses semantic meaning without the other. The self constructs its existential foundation strictly through its relationality to the other. This fluid concept permeates various philosophical streams. Sartre (1943, p. 269) posits an existential negation, famously stating that "hell is other people" because the presence of the other inherently circumscribes the self's freedom and possibilities. Conversely, Ricoeur (2005, p. 72) highlights the profound intimacy of otherness residing within the self. Levinas shifted the discourse from ontology to ethics, arguing that the face-to-face encounter with the other demands an ethical responsibility that supersedes individual selfishness and dismantles prejudices (Emmanuel, 1999, p. 228). Furthermore, Derrida (2008, p. 55) identifies language as the ultimate mechanism of this recognition, suggesting that the very language we claim as our own is, in essence, the language of the other.

In psychology, Baldwin emphasized the simultaneous birth of the self and the other, while Lacan (Al-Bazzi, 2008, p. 34) theorized the "other" as an unconscious, symbolic linguistic structure vital for the self's realization. Sociologically, Cooley significantly contributed to this discourse via the concept of the "looking-glass self" and the formation of a collective "we" defined in opposition to external groups (Abu El-Enein, 1999, p. 811). Synthesizing these perspectives, this study relies on Cooley's framework, positing the prevailing Constantine society as the defined "self" and the migrating Bani Mzab community as the distinct, socially closed "other".

2.3. Ethnic Group vs. Minority Group

The nomenclature surrounding "ethnic groups" and "minorities" is notoriously contentious. Ethnicity broadly reflects a social identity characterized by specific cultural practices, historical origins, and a deeply entrenched sense of collective belonging. As Idabeer

(2011/2012, p. 12) notes, an ethnic group lives within a broader society but is distinguished by unique customs, language, or religion. A minority, however, is conceptualized not merely by numerical inferiority, but by a lack of substantial influence within the overarching political system, coupled with a cohesive drive to defend its distinct identity (Barquq & Barquq, 2002, p. 266). While an ethnic group is not intrinsically a minority, a minority can be classified as ethnic if its differentiation relies on cultural or physiological factors. Within the context of Constantine, the Bani Mzab function as an ethnic minority due to their small demographic size and their profound linguistic and sectarian (Ibadi) distinctiveness.

2.4. Dimensions of Social Integration

Integration evaluates the extent to which a minority group is assimilated into the broader social fabric. Classical approaches, such as Durkheim's methodology, utilized suicide rates to quantitatively measure individual integration into the collective. However, this study adopts the robust indicators developed by Valensi (Valensi & Udovitch, 1980, p. 780), who utilized three primary metrics of communication to assess minority integration:

- **Social Communication (Marital Integration):** Analyzing integration via marriage patterns.
- **Economic Division of Labor:** Assessing the intensity of economic transactions and ethnic-specific economic niches.
- **Semantic Communication:** Evaluating cultural integration through the semiotics of identity, particularly linguistics and sartorial choices (clothing and greetings). This study maps these three indicators onto the relationship between the Bani Mzab and the Constantine society.

3. Anthropological Overview of Mozabite Society

To understand the contemporary dynamics in Constantine, an overview of the geographic, religious, and economic origins of the Mzab community is requisite.

3.1. Origins, Etymology, and Religious Trajectory

The nomenclature "Banu Mzab" intertwines human lineage with geographical placement. Historically inhabiting the intensely arid Wadi Mzab in the northern Algerian desert, the name is derived from their progenitor, Musab Ben Baden. The Mazabis have structurally integrated Arabic vocabulary into their native Amazigh language, a prime example being the term "zalit" for prayer. Over centuries, they constructed seven highly distinct, prosperous palaces (Ataf, Benoura, Ghardaia, Beni Yazgne, Malika, Al-Qarara, and Brian), the urban architecture of which has earned them a UNESCO World Heritage classification (Fakhar, 2017-2018, p. 129).

Ethnically originating from the Zenata Berbers (Bani Wassin branch) , the Banu Mzab initially adopted the Mu'tazila doctrine following the Islamic conquest. However, significant acculturation occurred following the migration of Ibadis from Tihart and Sidrata into the Mzab region. Propagated heavily by Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Bakr in the fifth century AH, the community transitioned to the Ibadi school of thought. Founded in Basra in the first century AH by Imam Jabir bin Zayd (and politically popularized by Abdullah bin Ibad), Ibadism is the oldest Islamic school of thought (Khawaja, 2017, p. 103; Aoucht, 1982, p. 20). Historically, some scholars fallaciously conflated Ibadis with the radical Kharijite sect; however, extensive contemporary theological research, such as the work of Al-Touati (2009, pp. 23-33), decisively refutes this attribution, arguing that Ibadism is deeply aligned with mainstream Sunnah traditions (Bahaz, 1985, p. 77).

3.2. The "Izzaben" (Circle of Celibacy) as a Regulatory Social System

Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Bakr institutionalized the "Circle of Celibacy" (Izzaben), which acts as the absolute spiritual, economic, and social authority within the Ghardaia palaces. Centered in the mosque, this council manages all religious infrastructure, including schools and cemeteries. Membership is governed by stringent criteria: absolute moral and religious rectitude, comprehensive memorization of the Qur'an, architectural knowledge of the mosque, and a demonstrated dedication to the public good.

The structural composition of the council includes three standard unmarried members, three Qur'an students, two financial agents, and a presiding sheikh or mufti responsible for preaching. This council operates as the supreme arbitrating body, issuing fatwas, resolving disputes in the mosque courtyard, managing city markets and slaughterhouses, and strictly regulating marriage dowries to ensure socio-economic equality within the community. Notably, members of the Izzaben fulfill these extensive duties entirely without financial compensation (Bin Bakir, 2017).

3.3. Economic Evolution and Northern Migration

Initially reliant on nomadic livestock rearing, the Banu Mzab eventually transitioned to a stable urban system, engineering sophisticated artificial oases and digging wells in the Mzab valley. However, the harsh, drought-prone desert environment severely constrained agricultural output, yielding insufficient grain and dates to sustain the population.

Consequently, organized migration to the northern coastal cities (the Tell) became an existential necessity.

Initiated as early as the fourteenth century AD (Matajir & Halaile, 2020, p. 236), this migration transformed the Mazabis into a formidable ethno-economic force. Lacking local industrial stability, their natural inclination towards laborious commerce drove them to establish a pervasive network of shops throughout the country, securing their economic self-sufficiency (Bin Issa, 1951, p. 61).

4. Marital Relations: The Limitations of Social Integration

In anthropological terms, marital frameworks strictly dictate social structure; endogamy (internal marriage) secures and controls tribal boundaries, whereas exogamy (external marriage) facilitates inter-group communication. Within the Mzab community, religious doctrine supersedes blood kinship in determining marital suitability. The Ibadi social system rigorously enforce endogamy to prevent the dissolution of their unique identity into the dominant northern societies where they trade.

Utilizing marriage as a primary metric for social integration, this study reveals a stark absence of communication through women. Even among university-educated Mazabi youth, there remains a rigid, categorical rejection of intermarriage between an Ibadi woman and a non-Ibadi man. This deliberate social closure critically stymies complete social integration. Spousal selection remains a communal, guardian-led responsibility rather than an act of personal autonomy, further reinforcing structural boundaries.

Nevertheless, subtle fissures in this exclusionary model are emerging. Educated youth increasingly perceive themselves as capable of sustaining their cultural heritage irrespective of sectarian differences. Historically, a Mozabi man marrying a non-Mozabi woman was deemed a punishable sin, leading to marginalization and exile. Today, external societal pressures and male boundary-pushing are slowly introducing gaps in this closed system, although not a single case of a Constantine man marrying a Mozabite woman was recorded during this study.

5. Economic Transactions: Trust and Functional Integration

Unlike their socially insular marital practices, the Bani Mzab demonstrate exceptional functional integration within Constantine's economic sphere. The very appellation "Al-Mazabi" carries profound symbolic weight, signifying an unyielding allegiance to communal identity and geographic origin. To the prevailing society, the Bani Mzab are fundamentally

recognized as an ethno-economic collective rather than merely a religious sect. Remarkably, virtually every Mozabi residing in Constantine is engaged in commerce, regardless of their level of higher education. Trade is not merely a vocation; it is the ultimate socio-religious rationale for their northern migration, operating as the core identity characteristic of the group.

This commercial proficiency has forged a robust functional integration characterized by deep mutual admiration between the Constantine public and Mazabi merchants. Mazabi trade ethics—rooted directly in Islamic faith and Ibadi theology—frame commerce as a divine responsibility. These generational principles of diligence, unwavering integrity, and profound respect manifest visibly; customers are treated with utmost attention even if no transaction occurs. This dynamic fosters a powerful "social contract" of trust, a foundational lesson taught to Mozabi youth regarding the sheer sanctity of commerce.

Domain of Integration	Indicator	Degree of Integration
Social / Marital	Intermarriage Rates	Exceedingly Low (Endogamy enforced)
Economic	Commercial Interaction	Exceptionally High (Functional Integration)

Recently, shifts in the labor division have occurred. Originally, employment within Mozabi shops was strictly limited by ethnic and sectarian affiliation to guarantee the preservation of their renowned honesty and work ethic. However, an observable increase in the hiring of non-Mozabite laborers—particularly females in traditional textile and attire shops—has emerged out of sheer operational necessity.

6. Semiotics of Identity: Sartorial and Linguistic Boundaries

Semantic communication serves as a crucial barometer of cultural assimilation, predominantly evaluated through dress and language.

Sartorial Markers: In traditional contexts, Mozabi men wear distinct, diminutive folded trousers (extending one meter to the knees and constricted downward) predominantly in white or grey. However, in Constantine, this uniform is now largely relegated to the elderly, who also don the traditional white "Chachit" hat. Mozabi youth have overwhelmingly abandoned this attire for mainstream men's fashion, reserving traditional garments solely for

religious ceremonies, thus blurring visual distinctions among the youth demographic. Conversely, Mozabi women exhibit highly distinct visual boundaries. While they traditionally wove and wore a white woolen sheet ("Ahuli") in the Mzab, in Constantine, married women adopt a conspicuously loose black hijab paired with a black "ajar" that obscures the entire face save for the eyes. Young girls wear a strict legal hijab that distinguishes them fundamentally from the diverse Islamic hijab styles prevalent among Constantine women.

Linguistic Markers:

Linguistically, the Bani Mzab predominantly utilize the colloquial Constantine dialect to facilitate seamless commercial and public communication. However, within the confines of their shops and homes, they immediately revert to their native Amazigh-Mazabian dialect when communicating amongst themselves. This linguistic dualism underscores a profound, conscious commitment to maintaining their cultural heritage while functionally navigating the dominant society.

7. Conclusion

This study meticulously navigated the complex dialectic of the self and the other, illuminating how sectarian identity dictates the modalities of social integration for the Bani Mzab minority within Constantine society. The findings reveal a heavily bifurcated existence. On one hand, the community exhibits unparalleled cohesion, driven by intense religious loyalty to the Ibadi doctrine and the overarching authority of the "celibacy" system. This religious kinship directly translates into a staunch defense of endogamy and a deliberate paucity of deep social interaction with the broader populace.

Conversely, an extraordinarily robust economic interdependence has been achieved. A true professional integration exists, transcending the stereotypical image of isolated ethnic trade. The youth now actively engage in extensive commercial partnerships with their elders and are heavily integrated into the public university system. This collegiate integration is beginning to gently fracture the traditional, mosque-centric social architecture. Although a small contingent of youth no longer strictly subscribes to absolute internal marriage, their limited demographic footprint ensures that the fundamental social enclosures of the community remain, for now, securely intact. Ultimately, certain phenomenological nuances regarding Ibadi doctrine and inter-group relations remain unresolved, warranting continued longitudinal observation of this uniquely resilient community.

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