Résumés/Abstracts


Physical anthropology is placed in its 19th century context; and its application to Northern African populations, critically assessed. Rather than being considered to be a mere discourse linked to colonial ideology, this branch of anthropology is dealt with in terms not of its subject matter—racial taxinomy—but of its field work. It is taken to be an inquiry, based on contemporaneous conceptions, into the nature of mankind and of culture.

A. THOMSON — Early 19th-Century Racial Classifications in Northern Africa.

Most of those who wrote about 18th-century Northern Africa tried to classify inhabitants by using criteria of language, housing, physical traits, etc. By the 19th century, Arabs and Berbers were seen as two distinct groups; but there were still several classifications based on a variety of criteria. These systems, particularly those used in Algeria at the time of the 1830 French expedition, are examined, as well as the names used to identify population groups and the cultural or biological criteria underlying classifications. The texts in English, French, German, etc., that are reviewed have not been written by physical anthropologists. Though not directly concerned with classification problems, they shed light on the approach adopted by the 19th-century anthropologists who drew up taxinomies. Similarities and differences with the texts left by previous observers are pointed out.

F. POUILLON — Ethnic Simplification: Moors, Arabs and Berbers (18th-20th Centuries).

Reading the accounts of travellers in North Africa during the 18th century informs us about the quite different ethnic classifications used at that time in comparison with the one that, during colonialism, was built on the Arab/Berber distinction. Questions are asked, in particular, about the notion of “Moor”, which has nearly vanished. It is argued that these differences result less from the poor quality of observations than from relatively violent changes in the composition of populations and from a reclassification in terms of identity.


From its foundation, the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris was interested in languages and especially in the relations between language and race. Research on the ancient and modern languages of Northern Africa was conducted from the early 1800s, but the classification of these languages repeatedly changed through-

out the century. Although it had been admitted that the languages of Northern Africa and of Europe were not related, special interest was shown, for anthropological reasons, in Berber and Egyptian cultures.

G. Boussoch -- *Black Egypt, White Barbary: The Missed Meeting between Biology and Culture.*

This study of the classificatory models of raciology used by 19th-century French and English anthropologists has two interests. First of all, these scholars played a central role in the knowledge that European, in particular French, science claimed to have about this part of the world. Secondly, the geographical region of North Africa raised serious questions for anthropology since the apparent “raciological” unity, repeatedly discovered there, could not be observed in the cultural realm. Anthropologists’ attention was drawn to the fact that the vestiges of a major civilization existed in Egypt but not in western North Africa. Oddly enough, binary models of explanation were always proposed for this: Copt/Fellah, Arab/Berber. Explaining the development of a civilization in terms of the biological characteristics of the people that built it seemed to be scientific to 19th-century anthropologists. They thought they could explain in a simple, satisfying way the complex relationship between biology and culture.

N. Coyle -- *Prehistory and Protohistory in 19th-Century Algeria: The Significance of Archeological Documents.*

By the 1850s, pre- and proto-historical research in Algeria had developed. Dependent for scientific and ideological reasons on French prehistory, this research was based on analogies between European and North African archeological documents. Scholars who had studied the so-called Celtic monuments in Algeria intended to prove that Celts used to dwell in North Africa. After 1868, when North African megaliths were attributed to the Berbers, discourse, though shifting, was still dominated by the question of the ethnic attribution and European origins of monuments. With regard to the paleolithic period, scholars unsuccessfully tried to discover in Algeria the successive phases of development that G. de Mortillet had identified in France. During the last years of the 19th century, this failure fueled debate about synchronism, a theory based on analogies having to do with morphological similarities. In parallel to prehistorical archaeology, paleoanthropology, hampered by a lack of material, worked out speculations based on European sources and dominated by an ethnic interpretation of archeological and historical data. Nonetheless this research provided information for the methodological revisions wrought in this discipline at the beginning of the 20th century.

J.-N. Ferré -- *The Birth of the Mediterranean Cultural Zone in the Physical Anthropology of Northern Africa.*

The main idea in the physical anthropology of Northern Africa in the 19th century was that Berbers were a separate people distinct from Arabs and related to European populations on the northern shores of the Mediterranean. It would be erroneous to suppose that these anthropological taxinomies of race merely came out of the necessities of colonization and had nothing to do with contemporaneous scientific paradigms. By dealing with the diffusionism of genes, anthropological research ended up dealing with cultural diffusionism: race was a sort of infrastruc-
ture: and culture, a sort of superstructure. It was also the vestige of northern migrations; but interest in the vestiges of cultural practices and beliefs tended to reverse the diffusionist approach: the diffusionism of genes merely served as a grounds for cultural diffusionism. This reversal is analyzed so as to show how the question of the northern origins of Berbers (Bertholon) became the problem of the existence of a Mediterranean race (Sergi). It is thus shown how certain cultural invariants could be studied in other than conjectural ways (Westermarck).

S. Bahuchet — Inventing Pygmies.

A verse by Homer is used to show how the word “pygmy”—handed down and validated since Aristotle—was used till the 19th century. During all epochs, efforts were made to explain who Aristotle’s Pygmies were: monsters, monkeys or men —until, after big apes in the 18th century, the small men of Equatorial Africa would become our Pygmies.