

Albert Camus, an Algerian of Minorcan Origin

Francesc M. Rotger. Journalist and lecturer at the National Distance Education University (UNED) in the Balearic Islands

Albert Camus, Nobel Prize in Literature, is the most distinguished name among the many Algerians of Minorcan origin that lived in the French colony until their exile, which coincided with independence. Camus grew up in a poor environment, with references from the source culture, and the Balearic Islands were the only Spanish territory he visited. As a journalist, the writer and philosopher reported the injustices committed against the Berber population, advocated the peaceful coexistence between the different communities in Algeria and rejected the violence of both. The Mediterranean Sea is not only the key to his thinking but also his spirit, because Camus considered this sea as the closest to his real homeland.

“Her own family, natives of Mahon, had emigrated as long as her husband’s family to come to Algeria because they were dying of hunger in Mahon.” 2020 marks 60 years since the death of Albert Camus (1913-1960), who said these words in his posthumous text *The First Man*¹ about his mother, Catherine Sintes Cardona (Catherine Camus, 1882-1960), whose Minorca family emigrated to the French colony. She worked as a cleaning lady, was poor and almost deaf-mute, and the writer, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, truly adored her. *The First Man* is particularly revealing because the text is a slightly fictionalised autobiography, as shown by many excerpts from the work: “He had been born in a land without forefathers and without memory. [...] But after

all there was only the mystery of poverty that creates beings without names and without a past.” Thus, it relates to his early published texts, particularly the first part of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* (1937).²

Emigration from Minorca to Algeria took place at a very early period, even before France completed the domination of its territory, but in the past all kinds of links between both shores had been established. The island had enjoyed a privileged economic status under British domination in the 18th century (the free port of Mahon), truncated when it returned to Spain. “Every day a number of men, most of them married and with children, come to offer themselves to go there saying that they are starving here, because they only eat a piece

1. London, Penguin, 1996.

2. London, Penguin Books, 2020.

of barley bread and on many days they don't have this food," wrote the French Vice-Consul in Ciudadela in February 1831.³

Joan Borràs estimates that around 9,000 Minorcans, almost 20% of the population on the island, emigrated to Algeria between 1830 and 1836,⁴ while, in 1888, according to Marta Marfany,⁵ the estimation is 20,000 Algerians of Minorcan origin. They are known as "the Mahon people", although they came from other towns and villages or from the other Balearic Islands, and they were considered honest and hard-working. This is how Camus speaks of his forefathers in *The First Man*: "The people from Mahon landed in small bands with a trunk and their children. Their word is their bond. They created the wealth of the Algeria sea-board." In the mid-19th century they founded Fort-de-l'Eau, today's Bordj El Kiffan, and, despite the marked French cohesion existing throughout the territory, the "Mahon people" preserved their language, culture and customs. The natives who worked with them also learnt the Catalan of Minorca and even today on the Algerian coast, although they are no longer there, the *pain mahonnais* (Mahon bread) is still made, as recorded by the historian Martí Carbonell.

Albert Camus, who lost his father when he was one year old because he died in the First World War, grew up with his maternal family, all of them natives of Minorca (two great-grandfathers from Ciudadela, one from Mahon and another from Es Castell): his mother, his uncle Étienne, also deaf and almost mute, a barrel-maker, and his grandmother, Caterina Cardona, also illiterate, who ruled them with an iron fist. Another uncle, Joseph, "only spoke the

Mahon dialect," as did his great-aunt, who also expressed herself in Catalan. The grandmother orders the small Bébert to take a nap with her with the enigmatic expression "*A benidor*", which the philologist Josefina Salord has deciphered as "*Au, vine i dorm*" [Come and sleep]⁶ and in their flat in the poor neighbourhood of Belcourt they ate *sobrassada* from time to time. As a significant detail, we can say that Camus named two essential characters in his novel *The Stranger* after his mother's two surnames (Sintes and Cardona).

Despite the marked French cohesion existing throughout the territory, the "Mahon people" preserved their language, culture and customs

Camus would remain interested in the Catalan language and culture throughout his life, as we see in many gestures: with the help of the Republican Víctor Alba, he translated into French *Cant espiritual* and *Soleiada*, by Joan Maragall. He admired Lluís Companys and denounced the fact that he was handed over to Franco by the collaborators to be executed. He became a friend of Pau Casals and together formed part of the committee of honour of the 1959 Jocs Florals literary contest in Paris, led by Josep Tarradellas, President of the Government of Catalonia, as Josep Fauli explains. He expressed his support for the tramway strike of Barcelona in 1951 and collaborated with the Casa de Catalunya and with Catalan publications in exile. In 1936 Radio Barcelona had appeared in the group creation piece *Rebelión en Asturias*,⁷ in which he participated, and in 1937 he cited the Catalan capital as a reference

3. J. Gomila and J. Sastre, "L'emigració menorquina a Alger des del port de Ciudadella (1830-1850)", *Revista de Menorca*, 1989.

4. *Albert Camus i les Balears*, Palma de Mallorca, Ediciones Documenta Balear, 2014.

5. *L'emigració menorquina a Algèria al segle XIX*, Palma de Mallorca, Ediciones Documenta Balear, 2015.

6. See the documentary directed by Luis Ortas, *Amour de vivre*.

7. Oviedo, Editorial Ayalga, 1979.

in a lecture he delivered at the Maison de la Culture in Algiers.

The recognition of his cultural legacy is linked to his commitment to the defeated Republican Spain, whose medal was, along with the Nobel Prize, the only distinction he accepted during his life. Moreover, he had an extensive knowledge of Spanish literature, which led him to translate and stage Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca. He admired Cervantes, Unamuno, Lorca, Picasso, Ortega y Gasset, María Zambrano, Baltasar Lobo, Antonio Machado, Salvador de Madariaga and Federica Montseny. He set some of his plays in Asturias and Cadiz, he used the bombing of Guernica as an argument against those who reproached him for the Stalinist crimes – which he also condemned – and, above all, he used words to combat Franco's dictatorship, the hypocritical support given by the Allies and its attempts to appear as a respectable regime to them, to the extent of resigning his position at UNESCO when the institution admitted Franco's Spain as a member. His great love was the Galicia-born actress María Casares, the daughter of the former prime minister Santiago Casares Quiroga.

He is a man socially-committed to all those who suffered some form of injustice, who did not follow any partisan line

Today, Camus is still an essential ethical reference against sectarianisms, and left us sentences such as: “Recognise what is just in your adversary's cause.” He is a man socially-committed to all those who suffered some form of injustice, who did not follow any partisan line – as he himself stated, “If there were a party of those who aren't sure they're right, I'd belong to it” –, incapable of accepting that no end justifies spurious means and proud of

his humble origins, which always placed him “in the service of those who make history; [...] at the service of those who suffer it.” Thus, on one occasion when he was invited to the Élysée Palace, his mother warned him: “Son, this is not for us,” and he did not go.

The Trip to Majorca and Ibiza

The first time Camus left Algeria, in 1935, he went to the Balearic Islands, where he visited Majorca and Ibiza, as reflected in his *Notebooks*⁸ and in the text “Love of Life”, from his first book, *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. The fact that he did not go the Minorca of his forefathers is baffling; perhaps it was due to poor available transport of the time. He visited Palma, the coast of Miramar, Vallde-mossa, Sóller, Felanitx, Pollença, Ibiza capital and Santa Eulàlia, and during the trip he wrote some beautiful paragraphs on Ibiza and the account of one night in a cabaret in Palma.

However, this youth of little more than twenty had an epiphany in the Gothic cloister of Sant Francesc in the Majorcan capital: “Never perhaps any land but the Mediterranean carried me so far from myself and yet so near [...]. It was at these moments that I truly understood what countries like this could offer me. I am surprised men can find certainties and rules for life on the shores of the Mediterranean, that they can satisfy their reason there and justify optimism and social responsibility. For what struck me then was not a world made to man's measure, but one that closed in upon him. If the language of these countries harmonized with what echoed deeply within me, it was not because it answered my questions but because it made them superfluous. Instead of prayers of thanksgiving rising to my lips, it was this *Nada*

8. Own translation.

[in Spanish in the original] whose birth is only possible at the sight of landscapes crushed by the sun. There is no love of life without despair of life.” Hélène Rufat backs up this revelation: in the Balearic Islands “he understood that a fundamental rule of life, which the Mediterranean offers naturally, is that ‘there is no love of life without despair of life.’ This dual life tension would, henceforth, imbue all Albert Camus’ creations.”⁹

The Homeland is not the abstraction that precipitates men into massacre but a certain taste for life that is common to certain beings

His spirit as a son of the sea is clear in this statement: “The Homeland is not the abstraction that precipitates men into massacre but a certain taste for life that is common to certain beings, through which one can feel closer to a Genoese or a Majorcan than a Norman or an Alsatian. That is what the Mediterranean is, that smell or scent that it is pointless to express: we can all feel it with our skin”; and in this: “We shall choose Ithaca, the faithful land, frugal and audacious thought, and the generosity of the man who understands,” as he notes in “The Thought of the Southern Midday”, the conclusion to *The Rebel*.¹⁰

After that first trip he never returned to the islands because of his opposition to Franco’s regime, but the Balearic Islands intermittently appear in his *Notebooks*: “The list of the places where I thought that I could live and die. Always in small towns. Tipasa, Djemila, Cabris, Valldemossa, Cabrières d’Avignon, etc., etc.”; “Because there is a young gentleman, similar to those who walked their long-legged dogs

along the *calle Mayor* in Palma de Mallorca before attending the 1936 executions as if in the know,” or “From the airplane, in the middle of the night, the lights of the Balearic Islands, like flowers on the sea.”¹¹

After having been expelled from Algeria by the war, he found a Mediterranean refuge in Lourmarin (Provence), where he bought a house and is buried. He loved the place so much that he came to regard himself as an adopted son of Provence: “When the Barbarians of the North had destroyed the sweet Kingdom of Provence, they made us French.”¹²

The African

Camus considers himself as Algerian as those he calls “Arab”, in a generic and incorrect way, like the “French”, whose origins are also diverse: “Arab and French, awakened in every corner of Algeria, sons and daughters without fathers who would now have to learn to live without guidance and without heritage,” he writes in *The First Man*. “What they did not like in him was the Algerian.” In Paris, which he did not like, he would always be considered an intruder: “So it was every time he left Paris for Africa, his heart swelling with a secret exultation [...]”

Camus was born and educated in Algeria though a scholarship to study the *baccalauréat* thanks to his primary school teacher, who saved him from becoming a barrel-maker. In Algeria he discovered his passion for football, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, did theatre, wrote his diploma essay (on Saint Augustine, another African), began working in journalism and in the publishing sector, published his first books and got married for the first time.

9. “Albert Camus: una extraña fe en el hombre”, Madrid, *Anthropos*, 2003, pp. 33-47.

10. London, Vintage, 1992.

11. *Notebooks*, own translation.

12. *Notebooks*, own translation.

Thus, Algeria is the main setting of his work and features in *Weddings, The Stranger, The Plague, Summer*, and in short stories from *Exile and the Kingdom. The Plague*, which in 2020 has suddenly become relevant due to the coronavirus, is completely set in Oran. The novel not only disturbingly enlightens us on human behaviours faced with a pandemic (the one he experienced still claims [...] claims the lives of one and a half million people every year) but Camus himself is present in its pages. Here we find Saint Augustine, the reserved maternal figure, the Spanish surnames, the journalist preparing a report on “the living conditions of Arabs”, the role of the press and politics, the plot of *The Stranger*, justice, the struggle against the inevitable, football, the death penalty, sea bathing, exile and misery as a teacher. Rieux’s doings are profoundly Camusian: he trusts only in doing his job well.

The Kabyles will have more schools on the day that the artificial barrier between European and indigenous schools is removed – on the day when two peoples destined to understand each other begin to make each others’ acquaintance

In *Algerian Chronicles*, Camus notes: “There have of course been exploiters in Algeria, but far fewer than in the metropole, and the primary beneficiary of the colonial system has been the French nation as a whole [...]. They need not offer up the French of Algeria as expiatory victims [...]. The era of colonialism is over [...]. And there will be no future that does not do justice to both communities in Algeria.”¹³

The “Arab” cause “is right, and everyone in France knows it, to denounce and reject

colonialism and its abuses [...], the repeated falsehood of assimilation, which has proposed forever but never achieved [...], the evident injustice of the land and distribution of (sub-proletarian) income [...] many French settlers have treated Arabs with contempt or neglect. [...] Finally, there is no question that the Algerian people deserve substantial reparations, both as a means of restoring their dignity and as a matter of justice.”

War

Injustice, as in any colonialism, lies at the origin of the 1954 insurrection of the National Liberation Front (FLN). The young Camus, a 25-year old journalist, had published in *Alger Républicain* his series of seven reports *The Misery of Kabylia*, on the 1939 famine in that region: “The Kabyles will have more schools on the day that the artificial barrier between European and indigenous schools is removed – on the day when two peoples destined to understand each other begin to make each others’ acquaintance [...]. But it is up to us to break down the walls that keep us apart.”

For France, Arabs are second class citizens. The rest, around ten per cent of the population, are the so-called *pièds noirs* [black feet], mocking the colour of the soldiers’ boots: “When the fate of men and women of one’s own blood is bound, directly or indirectly, to the articles one writes in the comfort of the study, one has a right to hesitate and to weigh the pros and cons,” he wrote in 1958. “Here I am recounting the history of my own family which, being poor and devoid of hatred, never exploited or oppressed anyone. But three-quarters of the French in Algeria are my relatives.”¹⁴

13. Cambridge, MA, and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013.

14. *Algerian Chronicles*, op. cit.

In *The First Man*, a bomb explodes when the main character is visiting his mother: “‘Twice this week,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid to go out.’ [...] ‘You see,’ she said, ‘I’m old. I can’t run anymore.’” Cormery (Camus’ alter ego) rushes into the street and saves an Arab pedestrian from being lynched by the French as scapegoat: “A filthy race! [...] All of them, all of them...,” a workman of European origin bellows.

The Arab people also exists. By that I don’t mean that they aren’t the wretched, faceless mob in which Westerners see nothing worth respecting or defending

One of the best known biographical episodes took place when he received the Nobel Prize (1957) and a young man, clearly an FLN supporter, asked him if perhaps the cause of Algerian independence was not just, to which Camus replied: “People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.” He managed to take her for a time to his house in Provence but she did not feel at ease because “here there are no Arabs,” the same feeling the son has in *The First Man*: “Meeting the Arab in Saint-Etienne. And this befriending by the two exiles in France.”

Republican and democratic France responded to the FLN attacks with state terrorism, and later with the Organisation de l’Armée Secrète (OAS), and the spiral of violence was unstoppable. On 22 January 1956, Camus made a desperate call asking for a truce for civilians: “My only qualification to speak about this issue is that I have experienced Algeria’s misfortune as a personal tragedy.” In 1958 he still advocated a political solution: “On the contrary, Algeria will be lost forever and the consequences ter-

rible, for the Arabs as for the French. This is the last warning that can be given by a writer who for the past 20 years has been dedicated to the Algerian cause, before he lapses once again into silence.”

And, indeed, Camus lapsed again into silence: in the early 1960s in a car accident and distanced from his soulmate Jean Daniel, an Algerian like him, because of his stance on the conflict. He, who would later acknowledge that Camus was right, received the news of his death by telephone: “‘Was the road wet?’ ‘No, dry.’ ‘Was there a lot of traffic?’ ‘No, it was desert.’ ‘Was a bad road?’ ‘No, straight.’ ‘The fate. It was the fate,’” concludes Daniel.¹⁵

The “Arabs”

Camus has been criticised for referring to Algerian natives as “Arab”, in abstract, and because the victim in *The Stranger* has no name. However, *The First Man* and *Algerian Chronicles* reveal how Camus valued them: “The Arab people also exists [...]. By that I don’t mean that they aren’t the wretched, faceless mob in which Westerners see nothing worth respecting or defending. On the contrary, they are a people of impressive traditions, whose virtues are eminently clear to anyone willing to approach them without prejudice.”¹⁶

In *The First Man*, it is an Arab woman who helps Catherine Camus to bring her son Albert into the world, while the father went to find a doctor. The neighbours in the flat of Belcourt are Arab: Mr Tahar and his son Omar. The neighbourhood grocers “come from Mzab.” Abder, uncle Ernest’s workmate, calls Albert “my colleague”. Tamzal’s family now lives where he was born. At primary school he sits with Arab classmates. His childhood hero was

15. See Luis Ortas’ documentary *Amour de vivre*.

16. *Algerian Chronicles*, op. cit.

a tram worker, “a tall and well built Arab.” Arab and French workmen travel together on the tram. The mother of his friend Pierre has “two employees, one Arab and the other French.” Camus receives a terrorist, Saddok, in his house, “the right of asylum being sacred,” who kisses his mother “in the Arab manner,” while he had already “Frenchified”. “She is my mother,” his uncle *Étienne* asks him, referring to the FLN. “‘Mine is dead. I love and respect her as if she were my mother.’ ‘Say, the bandits, that’s all right?’ ‘No,’ said Jacques, ‘the other Arabs yes, the bandits no.’”

The tombs with Minorcan surnames, like those in the cemetery of Kouba, are almost all that remains of the “people from Mahon” in the land they inhabited

The mistrust existing in the Arab environment towards Camus was probably influenced by his stance favourable to the State of Israel, “that they want to destroy under the pretext of colonialism, but whose right to life we should defend, we who have witnessed the massacre of millions of Jews and who find it just and good that the survivors create the homeland that we haven’t been able to give them or keep for them.”¹⁷ Camus had experienced those atrocities firsthand during his time in the Resistance.

In *El hombre de las dos patrias*,¹⁸ Javier Reverte reveals how contemporary Algeria acts as if Camus had not existed. Until 2006 not even a “small congress in tribute to him” was held and he mentions Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the founder of the FLN and president from 1999 to 2019, referring to Camus: “When he said that, between justice and his mother, he would choose his mother, he shows himself to be a real Algerian.”

Silence and Oblivion

“Old settler cemetery, immense oblivion.” In the original draft of *The First Man*, which was in the car in which Camus died on 4 January 1960, “the immense oblivion” is circled. In 1962, after the declaration of independence, around one million Algerians of European origin left their country for a France they did not know. “With my land lost, I won’t be no one,” Camus had lamented about that moment, without seeing it come to pass. The Centre National de Documentation des Français d’Algérie, based in Perpignan, honours with a monolith the surnames of 2,410 people who lost their lives during the conflict, and its small museum devotes one of its cabinets to Camus. For the “Arabs” a very harsh six decades of independence would follow, including a second civil war.

The tombs with Minorcan surnames, like those in the cemetery of Kouba, are almost all that remains of the “people from Mahon” in the land they inhabited. In 2019, two excursions organised by the Ateneu de Maó and guided by Martí Carbonell visited this cemetery. “The only consecrated traces of their passage on this earth, the illegible slabs in the cemetery.” We read in *The First Man*. “All those generations, all those men come from so many nations [...] had disappeared without a trace, locked within themselves.”

For Josefina Salord, *The First Man* is “the epic novel of the humble heroes that are called to be swallowed up by oblivion [...]. Recognising Albert Camus (Sintes) means recognising through him the Algerian Majorcan identity, a vanished historical presence and pure metaphor of uprooting, the absolute exile.”¹⁹ “We don’t preserve anything here,” a *pied noir* says in *The First Man*. “We tear down and

17. “Ce que je dois à l’Espagne”, *Essais*, Paris, La Pléiade, 1972.

18. Madrid, Ediciones B, 2016.

we rebuild. We think about the future and forget the rest.”

“The sun that reigned over my childhood freed me from all resentment.” It is the struggle against the invincibility of Doctor Rieux and the joy of Sisyphus dragging his stone every day

According to the notes in *The First Man*, the book could have ended as follows: “Give all the land to the poor, to those who have nothing and who are so poor that they never wanted to have and to possess, to those in the country who are like her, the immense herd of the wretched,

mostly Arab and a few French [...]. Knowing that those I revered, she whom I revered, are at last joined to the land I so loved under the sun where I was born (Then shall the great anonymity become fruitful and envelop me also—I shall return to this land).”

What may seem grim and dark to us is, in fact, luminous, like the light that bathed Camus, the suns of Algeria, Minorca, Provence, the Greece and the Italy he admired: “The sun that reigned over my childhood freed me from all resentment.” It is the struggle against the invincibility of Doctor Rieux and the joy of Sisyphus dragging his stone every day. Yes, there is no hope. So, let’s forge ahead.

19. “La menorquinidad argelina en la vida y la obra de Albert Camus”, in *Albert Camus i les Balears*, Palma de Mallorca, Ediciones Documenta Balear, 2014.