

Recognising Ourselves Beyond Cultures: The Virus Activates the Storytelling

“Unity no longer lies in belief but in hope”

Albert Camus, “La culture indigène, la nouvelle culture méditerranéenne”

“From spring 2020 it can be said, paraphrasing Albert Camus in *The Plague*, that coronavirus was ‘the concern of all of us’, like a blanket of silence covering all the cities of the Mediterranean, denying their eternal image of people in the streets and squares. The boredom of the lockdown appears transplanted in the form of apathy towards public leaders. The decisions taken seriously forget what happened in other great epidemics. And in the midst of this feeling, once again, world events, like the war in Syria or the migrants crossing the Mediterranean in fragile boats, are conditioned by a world that has decided to stop.” This is historian José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec’s account of Covid-19, who also introduces us to other narratives, testimonies of epidemics and plagues that have ravaged the Mediterranean lands over the centuries. Through them, the historian shows us the different responses that have shaped our world. Can the current pandemic have a positive transforming function, as shown by some civil society associations? Without being naïve, but taking a hopeful approach, the authors of this issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* also warn us about the dangers that stalk us when we seek a better future.

When we planned the dossier entitled “Intercultural Dialogue: Recognising Ourselves in the Culture of the Other”, the virus had not yet fully landed in the Euro-Mediterranean zone. However, we were aware that in the twenty-five years since the Euromed Conference, the Barcelona Process and the diverse policies that followed it, the world had changed a great deal and it was not a question of commemorating the process but of reinvigorating it.

If a few years ago we knew about environmental deterioration, we are now facing the certainty of climate change and its consequences. Even politicians – albeit not all – are aware of the need to meet the Sustainable Development Goals based on Agenda 2030, reduce the carbon footprint and maximise renewable energies. In the last two decades, the information and communication technologies have become the paradigm of 21st century civilisation, together with the predatory neoliberal economy and precarious employment, especially for youths and women. The wars that have devastated the Middle East region for years with the self-interested interference of the great international

powers, the major migrations resulting from armed conflicts and poverty, as well as the cultural misunderstandings derived from the rooted stereotypes that hinder the change of mentalities, are very well known issues that require urgent attention.

Many scientists and analysts have spent years warning of the risks of a pandemic, although they usually went no further than academic seminars. Nevertheless, highly influential books have been written by authors who paint a picture of possible future scenarios. Just as with climate change, many governments have spent years underplaying the dangers of epidemics. The 2008 financial crisis caused health and welfare cuts, whose consequences have endangered millions of people. We have less than ten years to comply with the Sustainable Development Goals, which implies the involvement of civil society to achieve more democratic and participatory societies, just as was stated for the first time in the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in 1995. Without a social transformation and an agreement on the interdependence of all countries, we will find it hard to meet the goals set for 2030.

The Covid-19 crisis will not mean the end of globalisation or European disintegration, but will be, rather, an incentive to shape relations between Europe and Mediterranean countries differently. Global interdependence will remain a characteristic of our time. We must seize this opportunity to reinvent ourselves and build alternatives to create an efficient narrative, a way to reflect driven by the concept of “international community”, understood as a social group of which all human beings form part, in the words of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Indeed, what today we call globalisation should not be limited to the mere idea, very popular in public debate since the 1990s, of a world capitalist economic system, characterised by global integration of markets and centre-periphery relations based on domination. Globalisation is a far more complex historical phenomenon, whose nature is not only economic and political, but also social, cultural and even environmental, as explained in different studies by the sociologist Saskia Sassen. Thus, she argues: “Transnational processes such as political, economic and cultural globalisation confront the social sciences with a series of theoretical and methodological challenges that emerge because the global (be it an institution, a process, a discursive practice or an imaginary) goes beyond the exclusive framework of the nation state while partially inhabiting the national territories and institutions.” On the other hand, we run the risk of witnessing a multiplication of communicative stimuli: the new rules of consumption, based on the spread of internet and the apps that go with them, foretell a future of battles to take control of the narrative rather than a real interest in communicating.

For this reason, and as we have been doing since the launch of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* in 2000, which was created with the objective of promoting greater dialogue, we believe that it is now necessary to reflect based on knowledge of the cultures of our Mediterranean geostrategic surroundings. We must therefore recognise their diversity but also that there is a “feeling of family”, as shown over three decades ago by anthropologists who are experts on the Mediterranean. We sometimes find great diversity in families because the differences take on greater importance in relation to the unity they contain.

This unity already defines us, as we have a foundation of geography and climate that has marked the cycle of the harvests and their ritual festivals. Moreover, the great ancient civilisations and the religions of the book have settled in our lands, and a continuous migratory flow has been established as a result of conquests and cultural and commercial exchanges. Today, through the communication technologies, it is young people who have developed a more significant process of cultural fusion, not only musical and artistic but also in terms of lifestyle, especially in the cities. Fostering dialogue about ways of life and beliefs on the other side of the Mediterranean would help to question the dominant discourse all too often peddled by the media. It would also aid the implementation of tools related to mutual perceptions, shared history, collective memory and visions of spirituality and basic compassion of religions on both shores of the Mediterranean.

In this issue, “Intercultural Dialogue: Recognising Ourselves in the Culture of the Other”, through their articles twenty authors from diverse disciplines and civil society representatives provide a great deal of sensitivity, experience and knowledge for improving the future of intercultural dialogue. They recognise the risks present, owing to a range of shortcomings that, tragically, have brought about the pandemic. The remedy, as they argue, is not separating and raising walls but remaining united and working together. The dossier is structured in two interlinked sections: “Times of Transformation and Resilience” and “Shared Identities and Traditions”, followed by a complementary Cultural Overview.

Times of Transformation and Resilience

We have seen that we can organise our lives in a less stressful way in a quieter and friendlier environment. We have discovered the importance of social links and the fact that the tasks of caring for people and common goods are the most essential. And we have learnt that the protection of each one depends on what everyone else does, and that we are all responsible for everyone’s health. This forces us to move towards a more sustainable and socially fairer time and space management model, strengthening the policies of cooperation and alliances with the other countries in the world.

In this regard, the writer Tahar Ben Jelloun urges us to share: “This immense health crisis has put things in their place: the need to share is inherent to culture, dialogue and respect for others, as they are the bases of a creative, inventive and living democracy.” Meanwhile, the historian José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec invites us to reflect on the known epidemics that have spread through the Mediterranean world in the last 3,000 years: from the arrival of the Sea Peoples, around 1177 BC, to Covid-19. In his historical reflection, he explains the diverse changes that this loss of life meant for the societies that have made up our world today, while waiting to see what this latest pandemic brings. Lucía Vázquez, expert on education and sustainability, analyses what the contribution and role of each person in this transformation sought by Agenda 2030 could be. She also recalls that, in an

increasingly globalised world, the origins, knowledge and traditions of the communities must be respected and protected, as a fundamental part of sustainable development: “We should move towards an education that enables us to acquire knowledge and promote habits in harmony with nature. Similarly, art has the ability to become a stimulant and driver of social change by appealing to our deepest emotions.”

Education and change of mentality are the aspects that most concern the Lebanese expert Nayla Tabbara, Vice Chair of the Adyan Foundation, who reviews the inequalities that Covid-19 has revealed but showing that the marginalised communities throughout the world are far more exposed to the effects of the virus than the most privileged groups, and that we are not in the same boat despite being in the same storm. On the other hand, Tabbara insists that, in our relations, no one is the norm: “Neither the whites, nor the blacks; neither the men, nor the women; neither the Europeans, nor the Arabs... This is what diversity can really teach us, and what our mentalities need to assimilate, regardless of our position on the colonial or imperial spectrum (oppressor, oppressed, or oppressed who adopts the dynamic of the oppressor).”

The commemoration of twenty-five years of the Barcelona Process is, for the political expert Ricard Zapata-Barrero, a good occasion to identify new ways to keep alive the ideals that now form part of the Mediterranean imaginary as a space of peace and prosperity, shared common values, and free circulation of people, goods and knowledge. Given the advanced state of the disillusionment we fell into from the tenth anniversary of the Process, even before the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, and bearing in mind that cities are the main focuses of diversity, Ricard Zapata-Barrero suggests an urban agenda of migration governance, closely linked to the urbanisation processes taking place today in the Mediterranean. In the same frame of mind and based on communication technologies, the researcher José Carlos Cabrera explains in his article that finding a place “to recognise each other” means, in some way, empathising with the other, which can occur in the cultural and social field and, specifically, in the common problems that all Mediterranean peoples have experienced throughout their history. With this in mind, he describes some projects, through an intercultural prism and in the form of technological tools, created to reduce the impact of the difficulties related to movement of people in our common sea.

Women and Youths: The Need for a Real Change of Paradigm

“Being in the same storm, but not in the same boat” is something that women and youths understand very well. The change of mentality is perhaps the most difficult aspect: recognising ourselves in others, both men and women, seeing them as having the same rights and obligations as us. It is true that over the last decade some fears have disappeared over demonstrating against authoritarian abuses of different kinds, and the echoes of these demonstrations have continued to resonate globally. Thus, we have witnessed the

Arab Springs in southern Mediterranean countries, in 2011, followed by the Hirak movement, which we covered extensively in the last issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, or the Fridays for Future campaign, which has demonstrated young people's profound social awareness and shamed the great leaders of the planet by holding up the mirror of reality. The Me Too movement has also resonated widely with women who have been victims of sexual abuse in different fields and countries. Finally, the last movement to come to the fore during the pandemic has been Black Lives Matter, after the killing of the young Afro-American George Floyd in the United States by a Minneapolis police officer. As Nayla Tabbara points out, this has made clear that the work carried out to date in the fields of law and education in human rights, the dignity of human equality and the importance of diversity must be complemented with a change of mentalities that can break with all kinds of hegemonies.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also revealed to us that the countries led by women have managed the effects of the virus more effectively. Moreover, it is women who have assumed the biggest burden in managing the health crisis and the responsibility for domestic services and supplementary care. However, this has not prevented them from also being the main victims of the pandemic, given that the crisis has aggravated the already existing inequalities between the most vulnerable work sectors and others. During this period, women have suffered more violence and abuse in many countries in the world due to the obligatory confinement of the lockdown policies. What is the origin of this paradox – asks the Tunisian jurist Soukaina Bouraoui – between the recognition of the female contribution and commitment and their denial, which involves such an increase in violence against women? In her article, this feminist activist defends the way many civil society organisations are fighting to ensure that the pandemic can play a transforming and positive role and, therefore, endeavour to highlight the importance of female leadership and gender equality.

We considered it interesting in this context of Mediterranean emergency and citizen revolt to introduce an article about the 8th AMCF Meeting “Youth in the Mediterranean”, held in Barcelona in November 2019 and organised by the Mediterranean Citizen's Assembly Foundation (AMCF). Through the practice of citizen diplomacy, this organisation has built a network of 29 citizen circles in 29 cities and 20 countries in the region. Vicent Garcés, President of AMCF, describes this international meeting, which looked at the situation of youths in the Mediterranean and offered them the chance to analyse and propose different perspectives in four agora: Culture and identity; Economy, mobility and climate change; Empowerment and citizenry; and New technologies and democracy. The meeting also had a virtual message that the thinker Edgar Morin sent to youths of the Mediterranean and that Garcés summarises in a brief motto: “Reflect, learn from reality and resist!”

Undoubtedly, we do not often stop to consider the great wealth of interculturalism, especially of youths who are between two cultures, as Mohamed El Amrani argues in his article “Children of Utopia”. Indeed, they play a fundamental role in our society, as

their experience enables them to create synergies against polarisation and find spaces of dialogue and lucid reflection. For this young entrepreneur and social activist, technology can be a very useful tool in this process, as it allows the creation of more open ecosystems where international cooperation can be a priority for different countries. He also believes that “these young people of diverse origin need to be able to exercise healthy, empathetic and transversal social leadership that helps us move towards a more inclusive, just and peaceful Mediterranean world.”

Shared Identities and Traditions

Although it has been sixty years since the death of the writer Albert Camus, perhaps today he best represents the ideal of an intercultural Mediterranean, of diversity and unity, where the centre lies in the values of humanism and not in the conflicts over religious beliefs or political and economic domination. Camus, as a witness committed to his time, never stopped fighting against the ideologies that separate people and nations. Humanism, based on awareness of the absurdity of the human condition and uprising as a response, imbues all the works of the writer born in Algeria with French cultural and Minorcan origins. In this respect, his novel *The Plague*, written in 1947 and a bestseller during the current lockdown, is premonitory. It is an unsettling warning, a metaphor for evil under cover of a mortal epidemic in the city of Oran in which the values of human fraternity are also shown. Both Camus’ essays and novels can be seen from the perspective of a philosophy of ethics.

In reference to this, the journalist Francesc Rotger writes: “The writer and philosopher denounced as a journalist the injustices committed against the Berber population, advocated peaceful coexistence between the different communities in Algeria and rejected the violence on all sides. The Mediterranean Sea underpins not only Camus’ thinking but also his spirit because he considered this sea as the closest to his real homeland.” The Moroccan sociologist and political expert Mohamed Tozy, before analysing the three great surveys carried out by the Anna Lindh Foundation between 2007 and 2017, which endeavour to suggest an outlook of intercultural possibilities between the citizens of the European Union and the Mediterranean region, warns that the current lockdown situation “can help us take a look at ourselves, while encouraging us to return to a slower, more accommodating time, different from the linear time of the stocks, accumulations and resources; a time that, today, has no horizons and challenges us to think about the moment and recharge our batteries based what Arabs call *addahr* (long dense time) in order to seek what is found deep inside and therefore strengthen our resilience.”

Do not the two shores share democracy and constitutionalism? Professor Gustavo Gozzi explores the issue of Arab Springs, particularly stressing the Tunisian case and the characteristics of the new constitutional democracy established after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. It is an Arab neo-constitutionalism that, despite showing a great affinity

with Western democracies, differs from them in its nature as a constitutional democracy with Arab-Islamic references. The analysis also points out the cultural compromise between tradition and modernity produced by the current form of Tunisian democracy, as well as the compromise between the political forces related to these two orientations. In this way, Gozzi reminds us that “Tunisian democracy is immersed in a learning process that perhaps has in itself the capacity to overcome the instability of the compromise made.”

The Algerian anthropologist Tassadit Yacine provides a different vision, based on the Covid-19 global crisis, which has highlighted an accumulation of failures in many countries around the world. In Algeria, the professor argues, the problem is even more serious, to the extent that a movement of considerable weight like Hirak, characterised by its pacifism and openness to political pluralism, has been spreading throughout the country since 22 February 2019. Now, with the prevention measures being applied in the health crisis, the Algerian government can legitimise the fight against this movement. The lack of anticipation of such measures against the contagion (health, economic and social) and the absence of real support for the population reveal the seriousness of the Algerian situation. Nevertheless, the anthropologist argues, through several examples, that “it is important to encourage bottom-up initiatives to save the country: the Kabilian populations, for instance, have shown a great sense of public spirit that have led them to confine themselves and take other measures needed to avoid the spread of the virus.” Through these initiatives, we see that the inhabitants of each region can help reactivate the economy and the plural development of the whole country.

Artistic creation and spirituality can foster greater empathy than speeches and can recognise the vitality human nature and the I understood as an integral part of the whole despite the diversity of cultures. This leads the Turkish professor and researcher Nesrin Karavar to present Turkish filmmaker Semih Kaplanolu’s Sufi-inspired trilogy: *Egg*, *Milk* and *Honey*. Born in Esmirna, on the shore of the Aegean Sea, a city linked to ancient philosophy, Kaplanolu grew up in a mixed neighbourhood, Jewish and Christian, hearing the ancient Sephardic language, Greek and Italian.

This multicultural environment, halfway between East and West, is reflected in his films, as is the dual Turkish cultural personality, built on tradition and modernity. In his parent’s library, Kaplanolu discovered the figure of the Sufi Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), about whose work the director has said: “One of the books that has most influenced me is *The Bezels of Wisdom*, by Ibn Arabi.” Therefore, through his analysis the researcher introduces us to how the director’s films are themselves a spiritual work, “like the prayer that takes place in the depths of individuals and finally transforms them. Thus, viewers of Kaplanolu’s films, like readers of the Turkish Sufi poet Yunus Emre, must lose themselves in them, as in nature, must immerse themselves, plunging into their depths, as in a cosmos.”

The writer and psychologist Saïd El Kadaoui Moussaoui argues that films and books are great inspirations and work as universalising and intercultural links as well as creators of identity, and provides a brief essay on the subject based on his favourite writers. Thus,

he explains that “according to many psychology studies that had dealt with children of migrant families in several countries, the human identity structure is characterised by its dialectical nature and capacity to integrate opposites. This can be seen in works by writers such as Hanif Kureishi and Edward Said, with Kureishi also questioning atavistic customs such as the marriage of convenience in his novels. For individuals to develop the full potential of their identity and avoid being enclosed in a prison identity to which, very often, society seeks to reduce them,” El Kadaoui Moussaoui warns the professionals who look after the migrant population to be aware of the great challenge facing them.

Why do we speak of shared traditions? As I said earlier, geography and climate have developed similar economic and cultural forms. Therefore, we have asked two specialists to explore two central issues reflected on both shores. Thus, first, we have transhumance of cattle, a task that has meant shepherds spending some months outside their homes seeking pastures and water for their livestock in winter, in less mountainous zones, to return to the fresh meadows of their land in summer. The transhumance routes, some of which are now thousands of years old, represent today an important potential for common green territory that must fight against constructions and misappropriations, which is why it is important for them to be protected. The French specialist Anne-Marie Brisebarre, who has based her research on transhumance of the northern and southern Mediterranean, shows that, in the Mediterranean basin, extensive pastoral activities, often based on the mobility of the herds, are cultures that have survived despite the modernisation of the sector. In relation to transhumance, she argues that shepherds are depositaries of a culture and techniques that are still very much alive, and that meet the expectations of society in that they practice respectful agriculture and stockbreeding. Although the wisdom and skills of the art of grazing have modernised over the years and shepherds can now train in specialised schools, transhumance of the Mediterranean basin is threatened because the pastures are usually a common good, a public heritage vulnerable to agricultural needs or construction in the different territories. Brisebarre warns that the countries in the region must consider transhumance as a fundamental thousand-year old practice for cultural tradition, the economy and respect for the environment.

The other issue of great importance is human birth, a critical moment where all the fears and hopes focused on the future of a new being come together. We are interested in knowing, not only in the past but also in the present, and despite modern medical knowledge, how these moments of risk are experienced by believers and non-believers within some traditions passed on between women to achieve good gestation, good pregnancy and the birth of healthy children. To talk about the childbirth culture, the anthropologist and midwife Clara Moreno Llopis conducted a series of questionnaires among Moroccan migrant women and Spanish urban women in the area of Valencia. Since ancient times, the study of childcare and traditional beliefs around birth has interested anthropology academics. Most of the research has focused on groups of older people and the memories they possessed of the customs and traditions of the different societies of the past have been studied. There are few works that deal with how young women think and their

level of knowledge today. Therefore, this is a very interesting article, as it speaks to us of the imaginary and records mutual perceptions.

Finally, the Cultural Overview complements the ideas expressed in the dossier through long-lasting examples of intercultural identity. Thus, the Catalan Arabist Dolors Bramon reminds us that the Arab and Berber ethnicities' invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, which resulted in the territory of al-Andalus, involved the settlement of both ethnicities in today's Catalonia, which led to a set of influences of Islamic culture. Most prominent are Arabisms, which are part of the fields of the lexicon and onomastics of the peninsular languages. Esmà Kukucalic, journalist and director of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly Foundation, outlines how Sufi tradition of the Balkans goes back to the 15th century, when diverse orders settled in the land that exercised a direct influence on the transmission of Islam, and on the sociocultural, economic and architectural make-up of the region. Finally, following the recent death of the Tunisian journalist and art critic Bady Ben Naceur, the journalist Maria Elena Morató shows us, through the master's works and articles, his long and broad influence on Tunisian culture. Naceur is a reference not only in his country but also among foreign readers and specialists; a way of living, of understanding culture and the practice of journalism as a multidisciplinary task with a humanist and committed approach.

I would like to end this introduction to "Intercultural Dialogue: Recognising Ourselves in the Culture of the Other" with the words sent to the AMCF 8th Meeting "Youth in the Mediterranean", held in Barcelona, by the almost centenarian thinker Edgar Morin, who has contributed to numerous issues of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* with articles we can find freely accessible on the journal website. His advice is addressed to all the women and men who wish to share a future of peace and mutual recognition: "Only fraternity and understanding can palliate the Mediterranean tragedy. In this respect, the civilisations of the Mediterranean will be able to go on because the 'matria' equals a land of destination where we are all citizens first and foremost. Do not forget that the citizen is someone who has acquired rights and duties, and is accountable for what he or she forms part of. If we consider this accountability, we will be able to overcome the conflicts, but only through exchange, fraternisation, meetings, friendship and understanding, with the aim of refloating the roots of different civilisations and regenerating them within a sea understood as our mother. We must understand that there is a community of destiny, a human destiny under threat, a threat hanging over everybody, faced with which we the Mediterranean people should be the first to act."

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